

A Conscious Choice

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The premise on which this story is based is not new; other writers, including Zoomway, have explored it in different ways. But I wanted to do it anyway ;) The story begins shortly after Witness, though diverts rather dramatically from subsequent episodes (though you will recognise the appearance of the globe from The Foundling).

This story contains explicit sex, and if you are under 18 you do not have my permission to read it.

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Comments, if you feel so moved, to w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk Thank you!

Wendy Richards

- A Conscious Choice -

Superman restlessly paced the floor in Lois's living-room, trying to curb the desire to look in on her yet again using his super-vision. She'd been sleeping like a baby the last time he'd checked on her, and that had been, oh... all of ten seconds ago, he estimated. She was *fine*. So far she was showing no ill-effects from the evening's trauma.

Now, he wasn't fine. In fact, he was more shaken up than he ever remembered feeling in his life before. Of course, he had rescued Lois from dangerous situations before: it had even become a standing joke

between them, to the extent that he, as Superman, was able to joke with her. He was usually too aware of the need to maintain his distance from her as Superman. But this evening... this was different. He couldn't have left her if he'd tried. He had offered to 'fetch' Clark for her, because he didn't think she should be left alone, but she had insisted that no-one else should find out what had happened. So he had felt obliged to stay as Superman.

He sighed, and allowed himself the comfort of another glance through the thin wall separating him from Lois's bedroom. She was still asleep; she shifted slightly under the covers, which fell back to allow him a glimpse of one creamy shoulder, naked except for a thin spaghetti strap in deepest blue. He felt his body temperature rising, and quickly shut off his X-ray vision. With a silent groan, he strode to the kitchen area and poured himself a glass of cold water.

Returning to the living area, he lowered himself onto the couch and forced his eyes shut. But that was no better: memories of the last hour or so flooded into his sub-conscious. Perhaps it would be best to relive them, he considered reluctantly; to exorcise the memories from his mind, in the light of Lois's survival. She *was* going to be all right, after all.

It had all started that afternoon at the Planet, when Lois had received a phone call from one of her snitches....

>>>>>>>Flashback< < < < < < < < < <

After she'd hung up, Clark noticed that she seemed to have gone very pale, but all she would say was that she needed to contact Superman. She refused to tell Clark any more than that. So - reluctantly - he made an excuse to leave the newsroom, but returned shortly afterwards in the Suit, drifting through the large picture window. Lois immediately hurried up to him; he immediately saw the fear in her eyes and realised that this wasn't simply another excuse to snatch a few minutes alone with him.

He allowed her to lead him into the conference room, where she began to speak at something approaching three hundred words per minute. While Clark would have been able to type at close to that speed assuming he could have found a keyboard which wouldn't combust, he wasn't up to following a conversation at that kind of rate. Taking Lois by the arm to calm her, he asked her to start again.

"Superman - I'm sorry - it's just you need to know about this," she replied jerkily. "I just had a call from someone who used to work for Bureau 39 - remember that lunatic Trask who wanted to kill Clark because he thought Clark had something to do with you?"

Clark nodded. But Trask was dead, he knew, so what was all this about?

"Well, Trask had this green rock - we called it Kryptonite - and he thought it could kill you, or harm you. Anyway, we thought it had been destroyed after it got thrown into the pond on Clark's folks' farm, but my source told me there was more. And it's been stolen by someone who knows what it's supposed to do, and they're going to use it on you!" As Lois finished her explanation, her voice grew more and

more agitated, and she clutched at Superman's arm. "You've got to watch out - or better still, get out of town until I find this guy!"

"And how are you going to do that, Lois?" Superman enquired, an amused note in his voice.

She glared at him. "By doing what I'm good at, of course. Investigating!"

He grimaced. "Look, Lois, I appreciate your concern. Really, I do. But I don't want you taking any risks for me. I can look after myself, you know that. In fact, you probably know that better than anyone."

She glared back at him. "But this stuff can kill you - or at least..." she frowned, "...can it?"

He took a deep breath, wondering whether it was a good idea to let Lois know the truth about Kryptonite. He trusted her - of course he did - but she was a reporter after all, and her greatest ambition was still to get the definitive Superman exclusive. He was also aware, he reminded himself wryly, that another great ambition was to get... *close* to Superman. And the two would probably conflict.... No, Lois would keep it secret, if he asked her to. He fixed his gaze on her, compelling her to meet his eyes.

"Yes, Lois, Kryptonite can kill me, if I'm exposed to it for long enough. Initial exposure also makes me invulnerable, so I could be killed by other means. But I am asking you, as my friend, not to tell anyone else about this. I don't need to tell you what some people would do with that information."

But Lois appeared to be hurt by his request. "Of *course* I won't tell anyone! What do you think I am? You say I'm your friend - you should trust your friends more, Superman!"

He grimaced, wondering how it was yet again that he had said the wrong thing to Lois. "Yes, I know I can trust you. I just needed to be sure that you understood that information isn't for publication. After all, I do tell you things which you can use in your stories." He decided that it was time to end the discussion: after all, she had given him the information she had. "I must go, Lois, but I do appreciate your telling me this." With that, he strode quickly out of the conference room and flew out of the window, returning almost immediately through the stairwell dressed as Clark.

Kryptonite was in the hands of some criminal who knew what it could do to him... Clark found it very difficult to concentrate on work for the remainder of the afternoon. He found himself going through a mental checklist of anyone who might want to kill Superman; after about the fiftieth name he sighed and decided that it might be simpler to consider who *didn't* want him dead.

As a result of his preoccupation, he failed to see what Lois was up to, and it was only some time after she had left the Planet that he noticed her desk was empty and her bag and coat were gone. A couple of colleagues confirmed that she'd said she was leaving for the day. Clark checked his watch: it was barely five-thirty. Lois almost never left work at that time. Unless... she was tracking down something she

didn't want anyone else to know about.

Like someone in possession of Kryptonite.

He groaned, and quickly checked her desk. She had been careful to clear all evidence of any notes away, but by using his X-ray vision he was able to detect some words in her handwriting. The name 'St John' appeared twice, once with the first name Nigel attached to it. Could this be the name of the thief? He didn't know; but what he did know was that Lois could potentially be in danger.

With a sigh, he left the Planet building, quickly ducking into an alley and spinning into his Super suit. As he flew, he tried to remember why the name 'Nigel St John' was familiar; suddenly it came to him. He worked for Lex Luthor! And that meant - Luthor had Kryptonite.

Abruptly adjusting the direction of his flight, Clark headed across to the LexCorp building. He hovered overhead, instantly spotting Luthor seated at his desk, along with a woman who seemed to be a personal assistant. Clark was fairly sure that the building had a basement, so he scanned that; he was right. Nigel St John was there, tinkering with some equipment. No sign of Lois: perhaps she hadn't gone after St John after all? He certainly hoped so.

So, he thought, he'd found St John, but what about the Kryptonite? It wouldn't exactly be sensible to storm into a room when he knew - or was pretty sure - that the occupant was in possession of that deadly meteorite. He drifted skywards in order to consider his options.

He didn't have very long to think, however. A voice penetrated his thoughts, and as he focused on the words, it became clear that the speaker - who had to be St John judging by his accent - was using a machine which transmitted on a frequency only Superman could hear. The gist of the message was that unless Superman presented himself at a specific location within the next minute, a bomb would be detonated which would destroy a subway station.

There's always a bomb, Clark thought resignedly. And in the middle of rush-hour?

What choice did he have? None.

He sped off towards the specified destination, wondering as he flew who he would meet. It certainly couldn't be St John, since there was no way the man could get there in the time unless he also had super-powers. And Clark was pretty sure he didn't.

Landing outside the deserted warehouse exactly fifty-six seconds later, Clark quickly scanned the area inside and outside; to his surprise, he discovered that the warehouse was lead-lined. Obviously this was a well-planned operation, he thought grimly; why else would an old, deserted warehouse have its inner walls lined with lead?

But he had no choice; he pushed the door open and entered.

Immediately, waves of pain hit him. It was Smallville all over again.

He crumpled and fell, unable to resist the men who rushed to his side and rolled him onto some sort of trolley. He was wheeled to another exit and then bundled into a van, which drove off seconds later.

Yes, very well-planned, he thought between waves of pain. The Kryptonite was still there, somewhere close to him. A blindfold was being fitted over his eyes, although his vision had been blurred from shortly after entering the warehouse.

He could hear taunts: "You're not so strong now, Superman!" and "Where's your powers now?" But the pain was so great he simply lay back and tried to let it wash over him. The only thing he could do was to try to conserve his strength until they reached their destination.

Clark was unable to tell how long the journey was, but finally he was dragged to his feet and out of the vehicle. The blindfold was still on, so he had no idea where he was; he simply allowed himself to be half-dragged, half-led along a passage. After only a short time, he was pulled to a halt, and his captors caught his hands and secured them to something behind him. There was then the sound of footsteps - leaving, he wondered? - before some more footsteps approached.

His blindfold was pulled off. He was in a smallish, darkened room, which was seemingly used for storage, tied to something with his back close to a wall. In front of him stood two bulky men with large guns, and beside him was the man he had recognised in the basement of LexCorp. Nigel St John now held a fist-sized lump of Kryptonite, and the sight of it almost made Clark's legs give way.

"Get... that... away from me!" he gritted painfully.

"And why would I want to do that, Superman?" St John enquired. "It's so good to see you, by the way."

Clark swallowed; the man clearly wanted to taunt him, but he had no intention of responding to it. In any case, it was taking all of his strength to remain standing. What did St John intend to do?

He wasn't kept waiting very long. "Superman, you have been a tiresome menace to a number of people for quite some time. It is now time to end your interference. I think this little piece of your home planet should suit my purposes admirably."

Clark glanced around him, desperately trying to clear the fog in his brain sufficiently to figure a way out of the situation. It wasn't easy: his hands were tied behind his back, he had no powers thanks to the Kryptonite which was still close by and was making him progressively weaker, and he had two guns pointed at him, either of which could kill him in seconds. What did St John intend? To kill him now, or make him suffer for a while longer? It wasn't clear from the man's words.

"Will I shoot him, boss?" one of the thugs asked, waving his gun menacingly in Clark's direction.

But St John waved him away impatiently. "I don't think that will be necessary. Look at him! He can barely stand. He'll be unconscious in a few minutes, and then we might want to, shall I say, perform a few experiments. It would be so much better to do so while he is still alive." St John paused, then, turning to the other man, added, "Go and get Dr Larson. He'll want to be ready to take tissue samples."

The thug obliged, striding towards the door and wrenching it open. How he wished he had the strength to rush over at super-speed and get away, Clark thought grimly. He couldn't even break the flimsy ropes which secured his hands.

He gradually became aware of something - someone - pulling at those ropes. His head jerked up and he began to twist around, but a voice hissed from somewhere behind and below him, "Don't make any movement - pretend I'm not here!"

Lois!! What was *she* doing here - and how on earth had she managed to sneak in without being caught? He groaned silently, despairingly. What on earth was she expecting? Even if she managed to free his hands, what did she think he could do? He was powerless and weak as a kitten - didn't she understand that?

But her voice came again, very softly. "Pretend to collapse - but keep your hands behind you," she urged. Why? he thought. What good would it do?

But obligingly he allowed himself to slump towards the floor. The goon with the gun rushed over, kicking at his chest and yelling at him to stand. St John came closer, a satisfied smile on his face. "My dear Superman - I do believe that you are weakening. I do hope the good doctor is here soon!"

As Clark lay on the ground wondering what his next move should be, a small figure emerged from behind the structure to which he had been fastened, launching itself at Nigel St John. Lois knocked the Kryptonite out of his hand, and before St John could react she had bent, picked it up, and thrown it to the far side of the basement room. Her aim was excellent. There was an air-vent in the side wall; the meteorite went straight through the grating and out of sight.

Before Lois could straighten again, the goon had swung around and hit her, hard. She went flying against the rear wall of the room, landing with a thud. A large mattress which had stood against the wall next to her - for what purpose Clark had no idea - landed on top of her, covering her completely. However, since the goon's next act was to fire a gunshot in Lois's direction, this was probably a good thing, Clark reflected afterwards.

He didn't feel any immediate benefit from the Kryptonite being removed from his vicinity, although mentally his spirits rose somewhat. He managed to drag himself to his knees and then launched himself head-first at the goon, who dropped his gun in his surprise. A struggle ensued, with Nigel St John rapping out commands to his hired thug while Clark did his best to make himself as difficult as possible to overpower.

He then managed to land a lucky blow, and the goon fell backwards.

Clark struggled to his feet and faced St John, who calmly produced a small revolver from his inside pocket. Clark instinctively reached out and seized the barrel, only afterwards remembering that he was without his super-powers. But to his surprise, the barrel began to crush under his hand.

His powers were returning!

Swiftly, he seized the gun, crumpled it and threw it aside, then seized some rope which St John had left over and used it to tie up both criminals. Hurrying to where Lois lay, he quickly lifted the mattress off her. She lay still on the ground, face down, and in shock he realised that he couldn't hear her heartbeat. Had she suffocated through lack of air?

"Lois?" he choked out. "Lois? Talk to me! Lois!"

He grasped her by the shoulders, turning her body over; her head slumped back. Her chest wasn't moving: she definitely wasn't breathing. Trying to control his own panic, he lowered his mouth to hers, breathing quickly into her mouth as he had been taught at first-aid classes years ago. Pinch her nose, breathe into her mouth, pause, check respiration, then do it all over again....

It seemed like an age, but in reality was probably only a minute, before she choked, coughed and opened her eyes. "Super... man?" she jerked out, her bruised brown eyes searching his face.

Clark scooped her up in his arms. "We need to get out of here."

Briefly, he wondered what to do about St John and his accomplice; the difficulty was that he didn't really want to explain to the police about Kryptonite. On the other hand, if he simply let them go free St John could search the air-vent and possibly find the Kryptonite again. But for the moment, the priority was to get Lois out of there and have her checked over.

With a brief glance back at the two tied up and seething men on the floor, Clark hurried out of the building and took off, Lois in his arms.

>>>>>>>>> Present< < < < < < < < < < <

He had wanted to take her to hospital, but she had refused, insisting that she was fine. She had only been winded, she insisted, and although she would probably have bruises the following day, that was nothing she needed medical treatment for. He had protested that she could have broken some bones; she had told him that she trusted his X-ray capacities more than those of the emergency room. His expression had obviously confirmed her suspicion that he had already checked her over for broken bones.

So he had taken her home, and insisted that she should go to bed. He knew that she wasn't as fit as she had protested: she really had stopped breathing for a couple of minutes, although not long enough to cause any permanent damage. That, added to the bruising, meant that she was feeling very weak and fragile.

So he had not wanted her to be alone, in case she suffered any

problems during the night; and in the absence of anyone else, he had to stay as Superman. Not that he could have stayed away even if another friend or family member was taking care of her: he would have hovered over her apartment for most of the night, he knew. But he would have preferred to be there as Clark. She hadn't wanted to explain what had happened to anyone else, she explained, since that would have entailed revealing the secret of Kryptonite. < Clark knows!> he had been tempted to tell her, but that in itself would have required additional explanations.

She had nearly died - and had saved his life in doing so. He still had no idea how she had managed to get into the basement, or how long she had been there. Brave, fearless, incredible Lois... he didn't know whether to thank her or shake her. If she had died....

Then something would have died inside him.

His contemplation was interrupted by sounds from Lois's room. He jumped to his feet, whirling around and activating his super-hearing. She was moaning, calling "Superman, Superman." Using his super-vision again, he saw that she was tossing and turning on the bed as if she was in some sort of pain.

Without hesitation, he hurried to the door of her room and strode inside. Reaching her beside, he grasped her hand and called her name softly. "Lois - Lois, it's all right. I'm here. You're safe."

Instantly, she calmed; her eyes opened and she focused her gaze on him, her expression fearful. "Superman - you're all right? I had a horrible nightmare - the Kryptonite had... killed you...."

He sat carefully on the edge of the bed. "Lois, I'm fine, thanks to you. See?"

"I'm glad," she whispered. "I'd hate it if anything happened to you."

"And *I* would hate it if anything happened to you, Lois," he said emphatically. "You nearly died tonight, and it would have been my fault."

"Your fault?" she asked sceptically. "More like Nigel St John's!"

"You were there because of me - to help me," he insisted, his voice husky as again his mind filled with the image of her slim, apparently lifeless body crumpled on the ground. Unable to help himself, he stretched out his free hand and caressed her face lightly.

Her eyes widened, and she covered his hand briefly with her own. With her other hand, she reached for his own face, stroking his jaw and the curve of his very masculine lips. "Superman... I'm so glad you're all right," she whispered, her voice as husky as his.

His eyes closed briefly. "Lois - I don't know what I'd have done if you'd died."

The air in the bedroom was thick with emotion: Lois was close to tears, and it seemed that even Superman's eyes were suspiciously

bright. She met and held his gaze for several long seconds, reading the depth of his caring for her. She **was** special to him, that was clear. Despite all the times he had kept his distance, never let her get close to him, he cared about her.

And how she loved him....

Something seemed to change in his expression as he continued to drink in the sight of her before him. Belatedly, she became aware of her attire: the thin silky nightdress in dark blue, the plunging neckline, the spaghetti straps which were all that held it up. His hand on her face slid downwards, apparently involuntarily, curving around her jaw, down to her neck, her throat.... She gasped, and traced his lips with her index finger.

Clark couldn't have said how, or when, the mood had changed; but he could no more get up and leave than he could have left her in that basement. Suddenly, all he was aware of was how sexy, how alluring Lois was in her nightdress, the creamy swell of her breasts between the gap in the fabric, the sound of her quickened breathing, the need in her eyes as she stared at him. Her tongue appeared briefly, moistening her lips; his heart jumped and his arousal swelled.

What was he doing here? He should leave, get away, go for a long swim in the Arctic Ocean - anywhere but here!

He leaned closer to her, as she leaned up to him, curving her hand around the back of his neck as they moved nearer to each other. Their lips met.

The first kiss was loving, reassuring, each telling the other without words how relieved and thankful they were that each was alive and well. Clark wrapped one arm about Lois's body, drawing her nearer to him and supporting her as she strained upwards to participate fully in the kiss. Her lips parted under the pressure of his; instinctively he opened his own, and allowed his tongue to emerge. She moaned in welcome as he began to explore her mouth, and the kiss grew more passionate.

"Oh Superman - Superman!" she groaned as he raised his mouth from hers briefly, allowing her to breathe. Just as quickly she was pulling him back down to her.

< Superman> The name rang in Clark's consciousness and he briefly hesitated. He shouldn't be doing this - he was kissing her, touching her, under false pretences. She didn't know who he really was, and there certainly was no way she would contemplate kissing her partner like this. He tried to drag up the strength of mind to stop what was happening, but it was so hard when her beautiful, willing body was in his arms and her fragrance was all around him.

As he struggled with his conscience, he became aware of something else. Her hand was on his leg and she was gently caressing the inner muscles of his thigh, just above the knee. She was nowhere near his crotch, not that his sexual organs appeared to be aware of this, or to care. His manhood was harder, hotter than it had ever been before. He groaned loudly. How could he drag himself away?

How could he not?

As if it had a mind of its own, his hand dropped to the swell of Lois's breast, slipping underneath the flimsy fabric of her garment. He heard her sharp intake of breath as his fingers swept in a feather-light caress over her flesh, and another gasp as one finger found her stiff nipple. His crotch was now sending insistent messages to his brain, which he was desperately trying to ignore.

Lois tugged at him, and he tumbled to the bed, lying on his side beside her. The straps of her nightdress were now hanging off her shoulder, and her breasts were completely exposed to his view. He took a shuddering breath as he gazed down at her, and his hand trembled as it continued to caress her.

"Yes," she whispered. "Don't stop."

He glanced upwards to meet her gaze; her eyes were glazed over and it was clear that she badly wanted him to touch her. Leaning up on one elbow, he caressed first one breast and then the other, his touch growing more confident as he continued. Seized by a sudden longing, he bent his head and allowed his lips to trail along the outer curve of one breast. Her moan of pleasure encouraged him, and he bathed her nipple with his tongue, rasping it over the rough surface. Her hand clutched at his thigh; her head buried itself in his shoulder.

He could never have imagined that sensation could be so powerful, Clark thought as he took his pleasure from her breasts using his mouth and hands. But she seemed to enjoy it as well: he raised his head momentarily to look at her again. "You like that, Lois?" he asked her huskily.

She reached for him with her hand, drawing his mouth back to hers for a deep, longing kiss. "Yes, you know I do, Superman," she whispered.

She traced his broad chest, the 'S' symbol and its surrounding triangle. "I want to touch you too," she insisted.

Clark swallowed. Lois wanted him to take off his suit - at least the top half. The thought of her running her hands, and possibly more, along his chest caused him to harden even more.

But he couldn't possibly let this carry on any longer. She thought he was Superman; she had no idea she was actually with her partner from work. How could he possibly be with her like this under false pretences? He shook his head slightly. He already *was* with her under false pretences. He should leave. He really should....

But her hands were caressing him again, tracing circles over his chest, stroking his thigh; her lips were nibbling at his jaw. Her voice was whispering to him, "Let me feel you...."

With a despairing groan Clark threw off his cape, letting it fall to the floor. His hands found the fastening to the top of his suit, drawing it off himself; then, bare-chested, he turned back to her. "Is this what you wanted, Lois?" he asked her huskily.

"Oh yes," she murmured in satisfaction, pushing him back until he was lying on his back on the bed. Bending over him, she allowed her hair to drape over his muscular, hairless chest while she trailed her tongue along and over one nipple. He cried out as she caught his

erect nipple between her teeth and nipped. She straightened and grinned at him. "You're the Man of Steel - how could that have hurt?"

He stared at her through glazed eyes. "It didn't - not exactly. But... it's sensitive."

"Like other parts of you, I hope," she murmured wickedly, a teasing light in her eyes. He blushed as he took in her meaning. A certain other part of him was very sensitive indeed at the moment, and he was desperately hoping she wouldn't notice.

But Lois was busy with other things, continuing to rasp her tongue over his chest and trail her fingers over the hard muscles of his stomach. His arms came up involuntarily and wrapped themselves around her, caressing her back through the thin fabric of her nightgown. One hand trailed lower along her back and down to her buttock; he realised, with another shock to his arousal, that she was wearing no underwear.

Her mouth moved lower as she kissed his midriff, his navel and along his stomach, to the edge of the lower part of his suit. As her lower limbs tangled with his, she glanced up at him again. "Does this come off?" she asked in a mock-innocent tone.

< Oh God> Clark thought frantically. < What do I do now?> As he fought the impulse to tear the remainder of his suit off, she wriggled on top of him. His hand, which had been on her silk-covered buttock, slipped down until it was covering her bare thigh. Her breasts, completely free now of their original confinement, brushed his chest. Her other thigh edged closer to his crotch. Unable to resist, he drew her eagerly down to him until she was lying flat on top of him, and with a gentle tug he raised her head to him so that he could kiss her again.

Winding one hand into her silky dark hair, he thrust his tongue passionately into her mouth as the kiss grew deeper and more intense. His free hand again caressed her thigh before slipping under her nightdress to trace the lines of her buttocks. He felt her writhe on top of him as the sensations she was experiencing got the better of her.

Now, there was absolutely no possibility that she could have been unaware of his arousal; it was pressing into her upper thigh, after all. She didn't appear to object: in fact, he suspected that she was deliberately moving her thigh back and forth in order to stroke him. His hand slipped between her legs, to his amazement he felt moisture. He was turning her on *that* much, he thought with delight.

"Oh, Superman, that's good," she tore her mouth away from his to moan, moving her hand to cover his, pushing his hand further between her legs. "Touch me there, please."

He raised his gaze to hers. "Only if you touch me too," he murmured huskily, amazed at his own presumption.

She did; her fingers traced the line of his erection under his suit before she laid her palm flat along it, pressing into his flesh. He gasped aloud at the sensations she was causing; then she shocked him completely by shifting position so that she was sitting on his chest

with her back to him. She bent over, giving him a clear view of beautiful bare buttocks and the faintest glimpse of dark hair beneath, and applied her lips to the bulge of his arousal, so evident through the fabric of his underwear. He could feel the heat of her mouth even through the Spandex.

Giving in to temptation, he began to touch her between her legs again. Suddenly she straightened and in a single gesture pulled her nightdress over her head, dropping it carelessly on the floor. Turning to look at him over her shoulder, she threw him a challenging look.

"You want me to... get rid of the Suit?" he asked hoarsely.

"What do you think, Flyboy?" she asked him cheekily.

"Lois... we shouldn't be doing this," he gasped, much against the urgent messages his body was sending him.

"No?" she asked him, her expression pleading, deeply aroused. "Look, Superman, I'm... I'm not asking you for anything - any commitment. I just want... to be with you, to make love with you." She swallowed visibly. "I thought he was going to kill you...."

"And I thought he had killed you," Clark choked out in return. "Oh, Lois, you don't know how much I want...."

"Then give in to it," she whispered to him. "Just for tonight - for now. We can think about tomorrow when it comes."

< We might not have had a tomorrow> he reminded himself.

He closed his eyes, his conscience fighting with his urgent desires. Lois made it harder for him by caressing his erection again with the base of her palm. With a groan he made his choice; lifting her gently off him, he levitated off the bed and swiftly removed the remainder of his clothing.

He heard her gasp, and assumed it was because he had used one of his super-powers, but he quickly discovered that it was his naked body which had caused her reaction. She was staring at his erection, large and throbbing as it was. A thought struck him.

"Lois... I don't want to hurt you - I couldn't bear to do that. Am I too big for you?" he asked her anxiously.

She shook her head. "I don't think so, but I could go on top - that'd make it easier."

"It would?" He only realised how ignorant his question had made him sound after Lois's eyes widened.

"You haven't done this before, have you?" she asked him, her tone one of shocked disbelief.

He shook his head, reaching down for his tights. "Maybe I should go...."

She grabbed his arm. "No! Please... I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You didn't," he whispered. "I embarrassed myself... you didn't expect that I'd be...."

His vulnerability both amazed and touched her; here was the strongest man in the world, afraid of making a fool of himself making love with a woman.

"Superman... I'd be honoured to be your first," she said softly but emphatically. "I just wish you were mine...."

Clark stared at her again; she really meant it. He couldn't help it; he bent and kissed her tenderly, completely unembarrassed about being naked beside her.

"Lois... I'm glad you're able to teach me," he assured her in a low whisper. "But - I'm worried that I might hurt you with my strength."

She shook her head. "Superman, you are the gentlest man I know. I don't think you'd hurt me. I trust you implicitly, you know that."

Only a little reassured, Clark allowed her to resume stroking his body. Lying back beside her and tucking her light frame into the curve of his own body, he began to explore her anew, using his hands and mouth as tools.

He found her centre; she was wet and inviting. He slipped a finger inside and she moaned, wriggling beneath him as she encouraged him to explore her further. Simultaneously, she curved her hand around his erection and began to stroke him. Their breathing grew shallower and faster as their excitement grew; suddenly Lois began to gasp and thrash around on the bed. Recognising from his academic knowledge of lovemaking that she was close to climax, Clark increased his efforts following her guidance.

Then she screamed, emitted a few sharp cries and her body shuddered several times as he watched in wonder. Her eyes opened and she gazed at him warmly; he wrapped his arms about her and held her as she stilled.

"Your turn," she whispered once she'd recovered, bending back down towards him. His shock when her mouth closed over his penis was absolute, but she only allowed him to slip in and out of her mouth a couple of times. "We don't want you coming too soon," she admonished him when he tried to encourage her to continue.

He gave an embarrassed laugh. "Actually, I don't... er, have any trouble in that regard," he muttered. She quirked an eyebrow at him.

"You mean I wouldn't be waiting while you, ah, *recovered*, do you?" she teased.

"Well, yes, I guess I do mean that," he agreed.

"Sounds good, but I'm just a little too impatient tonight," she growled at him. Taking him by surprise, she threw her body over him and straddled him. She wrapped her hand around his penis again and

bent to kiss his lips.

The feel of her so close to him, her entrance poised mere inches away from his arousal, was unbearable. Straining against the temptation to push himself towards her, or better still to turn them both over so that he could lie between her legs, he grasped the bedclothes on either side of him with his clenched fists. He heard the sheets tear, and groaned inwardly; he would have to replace those.

Lois shifted; now his penis was butting against her entrance. His gaze flicked to her face, and he saw that she was watching him. A slow smile curved over her face as she realised the power she held over him, and she murmured, "Do you want me, Superman?"

His face was contorted with arousal and need. "Yes! Oh, God, yes!" he gasped, while inwardly his conscience urged him to do the decent thing. He shoved his conscience to the back of his mind, and raised his hips slightly. He felt himself slide inside her, and cried out at the sensations as she moved on top of him, taking him in up to the hilt.

"You're not too big for me," she assured him delightedly a few minutes later as she continued her rhythmic movements, driving him crazy as she rode him.

"I'm glad," he said hoarsely. If this was what making love was like, why had he never... on the other hand, he was so glad he'd waited. He loved Lois Lane, more than he had ever imagined he could love anyone, and he was glad that his first time was with her.

"Want to try another position?" she invited. Seeing the warm invitation in her eyes, and the reassurance that she was enjoying this as much as he was, he nodded.

"I'll... take care of it," he murmured, then grasped her gently by the hips to lift her off him. He laid her gently down on the bed, bringing himself to lie almost on top of her, but floating just enough that his full weight would not fall on her.

"Can I... I want to be inside you again," he pleaded, his need evident.

At the same moment she reached for him, drawing him to her entrance. "I need you in me, Superman. Please."

From the first thrust, he forgot his fears about hurting her and lost himself to the sensations of being inside her, having her squeeze him, caress him... love him. Her whispers and moans encouraged him onwards, until at last he cried out and emptied himself inside her.

"Oh God, Lois....!" he gasped at last. "I... are you all right?"

She stroked his face with her fingertips. "I'm better than all right. That was... wonderful, the best experience of my life...."

He reached down and kissed her. "Thank you."

"For what?" She stared at him. "You gave me the most wonderful experience...."

"You gave *me* something special, something no-one has ever given me before," he replied huskily. "And you trusted me not to hurt you... I didn't, did I?" he asked anxiously.

"No!" she assured him.

He brushed her hair away from her forehead with a trembling hand. "Lois...." He trailed off, not knowing what he wanted to say to her. But she moved to lie on her side, tugging him down to lie beside her. He joined her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders to pull her head onto his chest. He lay silently for a few moments, unsure of what to say to her: where did they go from here? The fact that she thought he was Superman was surely a major barrier to any further progress, but how could he tell her the truth now? She would be furious - knowing Lois, incandescent!

She snuggled closer to him, allowing her hand to caress his chest and her lips to trail delicate little kisses across his jaw. "I love you, Superman," she murmured. "I know this wasn't... I'm not expecting... I just wanted you to know...."

His arms tightened around her. How could he deny her *that* truth, at least? How could he allow her to think that he saw this simply as casual sex, a one-night stand? "I love you, too, Lois," he admitted softly.

Her head jerked up, and he saw the shock in her eyes. For all her hero-worship of Superman, she hadn't expected that he returned her feelings. She must have realised that 'Superman' had some feelings for her, Clark thought. Much as he had tried to keep his distance as Superman, it hadn't always been easy, especially as frequently the only opportunity he had to spend some time with her, talk to her, have her respond to him, was as Superman. Clark... Clark just didn't stand a chance.

Sure, things had been changing between them lately; while she was certainly no closer to seeing Clark as a potential lover, she had seemed to accept him as a friend. When he had lost his memory after stopping the asteroid, it had been clear from her behaviour towards him that she cared about him. But... only as a friend. *That* memory had come back to him pretty quickly. When they had posed as honeymooners to investigate that Congressman's activities, they had got along very well - and it was around that time that she had started to phone him occasionally for late-night chats. He had welcomed that, but longed for more from her. Tonight... what had happened between them tonight, and Lois's declaration of love, would have made him the happiest man in the universe, if only she had known she was with Clark.

What would she say if he told her? If he suddenly said, 'By the way, Lois, you don't have to keep calling me Superman. My name's really Clark. Yes, that's right - Clark Kent'? How would she react?

He grimaced inwardly. He was very well aware of how she would react. Badly.

But what else could he do? He had to tell her, now.

But before he could assemble the words in his mind, his super-hearing

cut in. Someone was calling for help, and it sounded serious. Unsure whether he was relieved or disappointed, he sat up, gently putting Lois aside. "Someone needs me. I'll have to go."

He saw the flash of disappointment in her eyes before she replied. "Of course, you must go." She hesitated, as if wondering whether she should say what was on her mind, then spoke again, her voice tentative. "Will I... see you again?"

He knew what she was asking, and he desperately wanted to assure her that he would find it impossible to keep away. But his ever-active conscience was now giving him some serious trouble, so he looked away. "Lois... you know I'm always around," he said evasively, adopting his trademark stern Superman voice. He saw her face fall, and was instantly reminded of his conviction that she had been afraid he'd see their lovemaking as something casual. "I... we'll talk soon. I promise," he assured her as he picked up his Suit. A quick spin, and he was dressed; he dropped a brief but hard kiss on Lois's gaping mouth and hurried from the room, making for her open living-room window and the emergency.

Lois lay back in bed with a disbelieving, wondering expression on her face. Superman had just made love with her - Superman had told her he loved her! After all this time thinking that he didn't really care, that he was nice to her just because she was a journalist and therefore useful to him - although, she admitted, he had told her a number of times that he considered her a friend, and that he would always be around if she needed him.

'You don't need to bid for my attention, Lois,' he had told her, once.

'You will always be special to me, Lois,' he had added on the same occasion, almost causing her heart failure as he'd added, 'You're the first woman who ever...' He had paused, hesitated at that point, and she had thought he was going to say something romantic, like 'loved me,' or 'made me want to care for someone.' But he had finished, in a more distant tone, 'interviewed me.' While she had been disappointed at the time, she now wondered whether he had in fact intended to say something else, but had thought better of it?

But now she knew beyond any doubt that she was loved. And their lovemaking had been nothing short of blissful. It had been a shock to discover that he had never made love before - did they just not do things that way on Krypton? She frowned as she realised that there were so many things she still didn't know about her new lover. She had no idea how long he'd been on Earth, just for a start! And just what was his name? She had asked him that before, but all he'd said, somewhat evasively, was that 'Superman' seemed to have caught on. At the time, she'd been too flattered, realising that he was using the name she had invented for him, to pursue the issue further.

But now... surely, in their new intimacy, he couldn't refuse to tell her more about himself, could he? He must know that she would never tell anyone, certainly never print the story in the Planet. Oh, one time she would have given anything to be able to write *the* exclusive, definitive Superman story, but as she had come to know him better she had realised that some things - like friendship - were

more important than getting the story. Even if it meant losing the chance of a Pulitzer, for a scoop like that would certainly win her a major award.

She needed to be sure that he understood that she would never reveal anything personal he told her about himself. She had been hurt at his manner earlier that day, when he had seemed reluctant to confide in her about Kryptonite's effect on him, but he had told her even before she had assured him that she could be trusted not to reveal the information.

So where was their relationship going from here? Suddenly she couldn't wait to see him again. His manner when he'd left had seemed to be a little ambivalent, but he had promised that they would talk soon. What did that mean? At first, in the immediate aftermath of their lovemaking, she had thought - feared - that this might just be a one-off. But he had then told her that he loved her too. How could he then stop seeing her - unless there was some reason why he thought he shouldn't, something stopping him from entering a relationship with her. Was he already married, or whatever the Kryptonian equivalent of a long-term committed relationship was?

She would simply have to wait until she saw him again to find that out, she admitted sleepily, turning over in bed determined to relive the last hour or so in her mind before falling asleep.

"What have I done?!" Clark exclaimed as he stepped into the shower in the safety of his own apartment, having just helped out at a major fire. How could he have made love with Lois under false pretences like that?

He should have left as soon as the atmosphere had changed; as soon as he had been filled with that compelling urge to touch and kiss her. She had been fine by then; it had been obvious that she wasn't suffering any after-effects of her almost-suffocation. How many times had he told himself to make his excuses and go?

But he had stayed, and now all hell had broken loose. Lois had spoken of the feelings he had suspected she harboured - but feelings for the man she thought was real, Superman. And he, fool that he was, had told her that he loved her too. Which of course he did, but the truth was that it was Clark Kent who loved her. Whereas Superman... that one-dimensional caricature in the Spandex suit, who Clark had created in order to allow himself to have as near to normal a life as possible; Superman was the person Lois believed to be in love with her.

And because he had been unable to tell the truth, he would turn up for work in the morning and would spend the day with the woman he loved, the woman he had told of his love, the woman he had just made love with for the first time - and he would be unable to express his feelings for her. He would have to sit across the way from her and behave as if nothing had happened. He would probably even have to watch her sigh and daydream over 'Superman', while she treated him with the casual friendliness which had typified her behaviour towards him in the past couple of months.

Their lovemaking had been everything he had ever imagined it could be, and more. The way her body had arched and writhed under his touch, the sight of her creamy-white skin, the way her eyes had glazed over with passion as he had kissed and stroked her, the little moans and whimpers she had made as he had brought her to climax... the way he had felt when he was inside her. His body grew hard again at the memory, and he was unable to prevent his hand gliding down to close over his erection.

Closing his eyes to allow the memories to wash over him, he slid his hand up and down over his aroused and throbbing shaft, slick with water and shower gel. It didn't take long; the images in his mind were now based on reality rather than feverish imagination, and within seconds he was crying out Lois's name as he climaxed.

Lois was finding it difficult to concentrate on work; her mind kept filling with images of Superman in bed with her last night, worshipping her body with his hands, his tongue, his penis. Whatever her fantasies of making love with Superman might have been like, the reality was so much better than she could ever have imagined. Yet she was also anxious to try to behave as normally as possible at work, since she didn't want any of her colleagues guessing that something had happened. There was no way on earth that she was going to tell anyone about *this*!

But she was also wondering what Superman intended to do about Nigel St John. Given that the man had intended to kill Superman the previous evening, Lois couldn't imagine that her lover would simply do nothing. The fact that St John had gained access to Kryptonite made the situation even more serious. Lois might have managed to dispose of the chunk last night, but there was absolutely no guarantee that St John wouldn't have regained it, and he could already be making plans for another attempt on Superman's life.

For the first time since Lois had known Superman, she felt real fear on his behalf. Oh, she had been concerned enough when she had heard that someone had stolen Kryptonite, but then she hadn't seen what the deadly meteorite could do to him. It had chilled her to the bone to realise that, while affected by Kryptonite, he could be killed just as easily as any human. And he had certainly been weakened when she'd seen him in that basement last night. She had been hiding behind some old storage crates when St John's goons had led the Man of Steel stumbling into the room, and she had hardly been able to believe it when she had realised that he was barely able to hold himself upright.

But that had been yesterday... before they were lovers. Now, her fears for his safety were multiplied a thousand times. Where was he while she was at work? Where did he go last night, whenever he'd finished with the emergency he'd left her to deal with? Where did he sleep? He could have come back to sleep with her... although he might have felt reluctance to disturb her at whatever late hour he had finished. He also seemed to guard his privacy very jealously: but what did that mean in the context of their altered relationship?

That was a question she would not know the answer to until she saw

him again.

Clark logged off from the Planet computer network with a heavy sigh. It had been a long day - a very long day. As he had suspected, Lois had been abstracted for most of the day, the dreamy expression on her face and the secret smiles when she thought no-one else was watching giving away her thought processes to him as clearly as if she had explicitly told him that she was reliving her night with Superman. Lois was exhibiting all the symptoms of a woman in love... if only he was able to tell her that he was the man she was in love with.

A sleepless night and endless debates with himself had left him no closer to finding an answer to his dilemma. He had briefly contemplated flying to Smallville for breakfast, but the thought of his parents' inevitable disapproval had stopped him. It was not that his parents would object to his sleeping with Lois - after all, he was an adult, and he suspected that they would have been surprised to learn that he had been a virgin until last night. What they would disapprove of was his failure to tell Lois exactly who she was with: to carry on pretending that he was someone other than himself.

It was exactly as he had feared shortly after becoming Superman: his creation was taking over and dwarfing Clark Kent. In order to make any sense out of what had happened, in order for him to carry on seeing Lois, he had to split himself in two again. Or did he? The options were the same as they had been before last night's events had happened. He carried on pretending to be both Clark and Superman with her, or he told her the truth. If he carried on the deception, as always he had the choice of maintaining a safe distance from her, or of using his Super persona to pursue a closer relationship with her. It had always been his policy to do the former - but there had been a few times when he simply had been unable to resist the temptation of being close to her as Superman. There had been the few precious hugs, kisses, intimate conversations which he had allowed himself, and without which he wasn't sure whether he would have been able to cope with pretending his feelings for Lois were no more than that of a close friend.

The problem was, had always been, that allowing himself to get close to Lois as Superman was a double-edged sword. Sure, it allowed him a few moments of temporary gratification on each occasion, but it encouraged her to believe that Superman was a real person, and to believe herself in love with him. Her hero-worship of Superman had been embarrassing to watch for some time now. Second, it also prevented her from getting to know Clark better, from considering him as a potential lover. After all, why should she look at a farmboy from Kansas when the most powerful being in the universe was there for the lusting after?

And now he really had messed up completely. He had played to Lois's Superman fantasy to the ultimate extent. Before he had made love to her, the options had been easy. Maintaining a distance had been straightforward, and achievable - but how did he withdraw from her now without hurting her deeply and making her believe that he was the greatest bastard of all time? Equally, how could he tell her that he was really Clark - always assuming that he was ready to tell her - without her accusing him of deceiving her unnecessarily and treating her with contempt?

But he hadn't treated her with contempt: he had just been so overcome by the strength of his feelings for her that he had been unable to resist. He still felt hot all over at the thought of being inside her, of taking her erect nipples into his mouth, of dragging his tongue down over her flat stomach. And when she had taken his penis into her mouth... he would have granted her any request at all just to have her carry on doing that for another few minutes.

But he had to make a decision. Did he tell her who he was, or did he simply tell her their lovemaking was a mistake and could never happen again - and take the consequences in each case?

Lois restlessly flicked a button on her TV remote control again, unable to find a channel to hold her attention for more than a few seconds. Where was Superman? Was he going to turn up at all tonight? He hadn't said he would, of course - all he'd said was that he would be in touch. That could mean anything.

But surely Superman wouldn't just sleep with her and then act as if nothing had happened, or treat the incident as unimportant, would he? Although, she supposed, she really had no idea how he would treat a girlfriend - always assuming he even thought of her that way. But he had never made love before last night, so perhaps he wasn't accustomed to relationships, or at least relationships Earth-style.

She pottered into the kitchen to get herself a cold drink, but stopped dead as she suddenly heard a rustling of wind outside her living-room window. Whirling around, she saw a flash of red; then there was the sound of tapping on the glass. She hurried over, wondering why he was knocking when the window was open.

"I thought I shouldn't just assume I had the right to come in," Superman explained as she came closer. She beckoned to him, and he jumped down from the sill into the room. As he did so, she scanned his features for any hint of his attitude towards her. What she saw reassured her, but only a little. He seemed pleased to see her, but also wary and a little nervous.

She stepped towards him, seeking a kiss, but was taken aback when he evaded her movement. He spoke, his voice attempting to create a distance between them. "Lois - we need to talk."

A cold shudder coursed through her. Was he going to dump her?

Clark watched Lois's reaction to his words, and grimaced, lowering his gaze away from hers. How on earth was he going to handle this? He had arrived at her apartment finally determined to tell her the truth. He was going to confess, to tell her that he was Clark, and to beg her to accept him for who he really was. He was aware that he couldn't expect her to continue with an intimate relationship as if nothing had happened, but he hoped that at least she would give him a chance to win back her respect and affection.

He took a deep breath and raised his gaze from the floor. "Lois, I'm... I'm...." < Oh, God, how was he going to tell her? What the hell did he say to explain his actions? >

He heard her sharp intake of breath and saw the colour drain from her face. What was she imagining?

Pictures flashed into his mind suddenly: images of himself, as Clark, with Lois.

< Don't fall for me, Farmboy, I don't have time for it>

< Clark's the before, and Superman's the after. Make that the way, way after>

< There is 'you', there is 'I', there is no 'we'. Not ever>

How could he risk telling her who he was? It was simple. He couldn't. No, he would have to go on letting her believe that her partner and her lover were two different men.

So.... He sighed again, then glanced warily at her. "Lois... I don't want you to think last night meant nothing to me. It was... wonderful, incredibly special. But you and I can't have a relationship."

She had been expecting something like that, it was clear from her expression. Her eyes darkened with pain, and she stepped backwards, holding onto the back of her sofa for support.

"Why not, Superman?" she asked, looking him directly in the eye.

He sighed again. "Lois, you must know that if it became known that you and I were close, people would use you to get to me. I can't take that risk with your safety." Well, that was a convincing excuse for backing off, he thought; it also had the advantage of being true. Problem was, just being with her again reminded him of how much he wanted to touch her, to *be* with her... but he couldn't. Not under the circumstances. Not when she thought he was someone he wasn't. As he'd told his parents a few months ago, there were times when he felt like he was losing himself to the man in the red, yellow, and blue suit. And this situation certainly had the potential to be one of them.

After the initial shock of Superman's announcement had sunk in, Lois watched him curiously. His eyes... his whole expression suggested that his decision was causing him as much pain as it was her. So he didn't want to stop either? Would he, given the choice, continue to see her, make love with her? Did he really want a relationship with her?

She took a couple of steps towards him, laying her hand on his arm and tilting her head so that she was looking directly into his eyes. "Superman... I understand the dangers, and I can see that if anyone found out about us it could be difficult. But - well, why would anyone find out? Did anyone follow you here tonight?"

He shook his head. "I can fly fast enough not to be seen anyway," he replied slowly, reluctantly.

She smiled at him, her expression persuasive. "So who's going to see you coming here? And I wasn't exactly imagining that we might go out to dinner or the movies together like other people..." < other

couples> "...I know you can't be seen publicly with me. And I'm a professional, Superman. I'm quite capable of treating you the same as I always have when we meet in public."

Clark smiled involuntarily at that. "You are, Lois?" What's new then, he wondered a touch cynically. Did she even know how much of her feelings she betrayed when she was around him in public?

"Sure. Look...." She trailed off, then hesitated and began again. "Superman, last night was the most wonderful experience of my life. I don't want that to be the only time we... but if it has to be, then I respect your decision. I just want you to know that I still love you, that I'll always love you."

Clark smiled wryly at that, placing his hand lightly over hers, then gestured towards the couch. "Can we sit...?"

Turning his body so that he was facing her, he said tentatively, "Lois, you say you love me - but you really don't know me."

But she shook her head vehemently. "I may not know certain things about you, like how long you've been on Earth, where you go when you're not saving people, what your real name is... but they're just facts. They don't really affect *you*, who you are. I know that you are the most honest, decent man I know. You may be an alien from another planet, but you have more humanity in your little finger than most people I know have in their entire bodies. You are gentle, caring, considerate and *good*. They're the things that matter about you, Superman, and in that respect I know you as well as I need to."

Clark sat listening to Lois's words, completely taken aback. He was so accustomed to thinking of Superman as a one-dimensional cartoon character, someone who didn't really exist, he realised, that he tended to forget that people who encountered Superman thought that he *was* a real person. He was so used to blaming Lois for failing to see through the disguise and falling for the cartoon that, again, he forgot that she had no reason to see through it. For her, the cartoon was real. Superman was a real person, a man she met frequently and had made up her own mind about. She *wasn't* just falling for the Super-powers and the flying; she understood his values and ethics, and admired them.

It was just... why didn't she recognise that Clark had exactly the same values?

But then, Clark didn't wear a flashy outfit, and save her life so many times. No, that wasn't true, he reminded himself; he had saved her life as Clark a couple of times now, counting the explosion Toni Baines had caused, and when he'd rescued her from 'Mr Makeup' at her apartment a few days before. She had been grateful then; hadn't wanted Clark to leave her, in fact. But her attitude to him subsequently hadn't been anything like her attitude to Superman. She had, in fact, been a little contemptuous of his efforts to protect her. That rankled.

But, he reminded himself, Lois seemed perfectly sincere in what she was now saying. He had to give her credit for that. So he reached for her hand and held it between his two larger ones as he smiled wryly at her. "You seem to have been watching me pretty closely."

"That *is* my job, Superman," she pointed out. "And anyway, I... I've loved you for a long time. Of course I notice things about you." Was he weakening, she wondered? It would break her heart if he decided to leave now, ending their affair before it had barely started. Instinctively she knew that if he left, it would be the last time they spoke alone. He would never again visit her apartment.

Desperation made her slide nearer to him, made her reach for his face with her free hand. She laid her palm flat against his cheek, caressing him gently. He released one hand to lay his on top of hers, his fingers closing around it.

The edge of her palm brushed the corner of his mouth; involuntarily, Clark pressed a kiss on it. Her eyes widened, and slowly she raised her other hand, which he still held, to her face, brushing her lips across the back of his hand, holding his gaze with hers as she did so.

"Lois...." Clark's voice trailed off; he had no idea what he wanted to do, or what he should do, now.

No, that wasn't true, he told himself grimly. What he *should* do was say goodbye, then fly right out of that window.

What he *wanted* to do was to take her in his arms and fly her into the bedroom.

His body had no doubt at all of what it wanted; his manhood was already swelling and making a prominent appearance against the skin-tight Spandex. His gaze flickered to Lois's face again, and he saw that she was staring at his crotch. She must have felt his gaze on hers, for she looked up and met his eyes. He was expecting her expression to be triumphant, a reflection that she was aware of her power over him, but to his surprise she was blushing.

"I... I'm sorry, you just have that effect on me," he found himself stammering.

She smiled shyly at him. "I'm glad. Umm... you have a similar sort of effect on me, you know."

"I do?" He felt even more aroused at the thought. < This is dangerous territory, Clark! Get out of here!>

"Well, you saw last night," she explained, her hair falling across her face as she lowered her head to avoid meeting his gaze. He loved discovering that she could be shy, although after her sexual assertiveness the previous evening it was a surprise to him. "But... let me show you," she added.

He still held her hand, he realised; she guided their hands downwards until the back of his hand grazed her breast. The nipple was prominent, hard.

"Oh, God, Lois," he groaned. "Don't... you make this so hard for me...."

He *did* still want her! She was tempted to throw caution to the wind

and kiss him passionately, confident that he would soon surrender to her. But what if he did make love with her again, and afterwards regretted it - would he blame her? Would she lose his friendship entirely?

It wasn't worth the risk, she decided, just as Superman muttered something indistinct in his throat and slid his free hand around the back of her neck, drawing her closer to him. His lips sought and found hers, kissing her roughly, passionately.

Clark's conscience had been fighting with his growing desire to make love with Lois again; he knew that he was wrong to want it, and that if he had any decency at all he would leave. But it was so hard when she was so close to him, and so willing, and so soft and sweet and loving and beautiful and sexy and sensuous and....

Telling his conscience to go to hell, he reached for her.

Her senses already dazed by the power of his kisses, Lois found that she was experiencing the strangest sensation. It felt as if she was somehow drifting... no longer half-lying on the couch, she seemed to be suspended in mid-air. She reached out her hand and felt underneath her: her fingers met empty air. Her eyes jerked open.

She was in Superman's arms, and he was floating them across the room, towards her bedroom. And yet, while he had to be concentrating on what he was doing, he was also continuing to kiss her with urgent passion. His arms were holding her close to him, but he was also doing exciting things to her with his fingers.

Knowing he would never drop her, she relaxed in his grasp, allowing her hands to trail over his chest and shoulders. Moments later, she was being laid gently down on the bed, and he swiftly joined her, leaning up on one elbow beside her so that he could watch her as he allowed his free hand to trail across her chest. Her blouse had somehow come unbuttoned some time ago, and the cups of her bra had slipped down so that her nipples were exposed. She smiled up at him, and his lips curved responsively into a warm, loving smile.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Superman?" she asked, half-dreading the answer she might get. She had felt compelled to ask him, given his insistence earlier that he couldn't continue a relationship with her. The last thing she wanted, she reminded herself, was that he would regret his actions later.

For a moment his expression was regretful, constrained. Then he nodded. "I want to be with you, Lois. You have my word that I'll always do my best to keep you safe from anyone who wants to get at me through you."

She traced his jaw with her finger. "You can't guarantee that, Superman, and I wouldn't want you to. Look, everything in life carries risks, but if we never took chances life'd be pretty boring. I want to be with you - I'm willing to take the chance if you are."

Clark was silent for a moment. He was aware that Lois was one of the

bravest people he knew: foolhardy, some called her. He had already, in the few months he'd known her, saved her life a number of times, and already he lived in dread of the one time when he'd be too late. But she was right: life was full of risks. He could only protect her to the best of his ability. And if she was willing to accept the risks associated with being more closely involved with him... well, then, so should he be. She was an adult, after all, and fully aware of what she was doing.

Except... she thought she was doing it with Superman, not Clark Kent.

Again he swatted the voice of his conscience away. Lois believed that Superman was real, and she loved him. Well, he *was* Superman; he was also Clark Kent, but perhaps one day he would be able to tell her that. If they became close enough, maybe the time would be right, one day, when he could tell her he was Clark and she would understand. For now, he would love her in the only way he could.

Their clothing seemed to melt away, and in minutes they were lying naked in each other's arms. Clark drank in the beauty of her body, loving the freedom to look at her and touch her, and to have her hands and mouth explore his body. He gasped as she took him in her mouth again, writhing on the bed as the sweet, throbbing sensations flooded over him. This time she lingered longer, getting to know every inch of him, her hands and mouth working their magic on him. He was getting so close...

But then she stopped, sliding up the bed again to kiss his mouth, the taste of him still on her lips. Her tongue slid into his mouth and he met it eagerly with his own, tasting her and moving past to explore her own mouth. Her warm body was pressing close to his, and acting on instinct he grasped her by the waist and lifted them both into the air. She stared at him in wonder, and he lifted his mouth from hers long enough to whisper, "Trust me."

"Of course I do," she assured him.

He briefly considered, then discarded, ideas of making love to her on the ceiling; too kinky, perhaps, possibly too dangerous. He turned them over so that she was beneath him before drifting them downwards again. Anxiously searching her face - was he being in too much of a hurry? - he silently asked whether she was ready for him. She reached out to touch his face.

"We have all night, Superman. We can take it more slowly next time."

< Oh, God... next time... > "Unless I have to go...." he pointed out.

She tugged him closer to her. "Make love to me, Superman."

He knelt between her parted legs. She was wet and ready for him, and her eager hands caressing his erection left him in no doubt of her desires. He positioned himself at her entrance, and thrust forward; her answering groan and writhe told him that he was pleasuring her as much as himself. As he slid in up to the hilt, she felt wet and hot and slick, tight and welcoming. Instinctively he withdrew and thrust again.

"Tell me... if I hurt you..." he gasped.

But she shook her head. "You only give me pleasure - can't you see how much?"

"Oh, God, Lois!" His thrusts became shorter, swifter, as she moved her hips in rhythm with his movements. Her little cries became more frequent and fervent, and as she began to thrash about in the throes of orgasm he realised his own climax was approaching. Within seconds, he was spilling himself in her.

They lay together in the afterglow, their arms wrapped about each other, not speaking. Clark dropped a series of tiny kisses on the top of her head as she nestled against him, her lips nuzzling his throat. After a few minutes, her body shivered slightly. He tilted her face towards him, his expression concerned.

"Are you cold, sweetheart?" < Sweetheart...? Where did that come from?> he wondered.

Lois's face lit up at the endearment. "A little - if I could just pull the covers up...."

"Let me," he offered, floating them up again so that he could lift the sheets before bringing them back down to lie underneath.

"Thanks," she murmured, snuggling back against him.

He was silent for a few moments, just enjoying the sheer delight of being with the woman he loved. Then something occurred to him, and he sat upright as the implications of what they had done dawned on him.

"Lois... protection... we didn't use any!" he stammered awkwardly. Twice. They had made love twice and he had made no effort to protect her from the consequences.

She reached out and touched his arm lightly, reassuringly. "Superman... honey, I'm on the pill." She saw his expression, relief followed by something else - distaste? jealousy? - and she quickly explained. "It's for medical reasons... I have very irregular... um, periods...."

"Ah." He blushed, and she again wondered at it.

"Anyway, um, there's no need to worry about any unwanted, um, pregnancy," she assured him.

But he immediately wrapped his arms tightly around her. "Lois - if you did become pregnant I would look after you. Never doubt that."

Meeting his gaze, she replied shyly, "I know you would. But that's something you can do without, I guess." She frowned, then added, "*Could* I become pregnant, anyway? I mean, you being Kryptonian...?"

He shrugged and shook his head. "I have no idea, sorry." He knew so

little about himself, his genetic heritage and his own biology, he realised; and it was very difficult sometimes to cope with that lack of knowledge.

Lois noticed that the question seemed to bother him, so she left the subject there. "At least we know there's no danger of any unwanted diseases - yesterday was your first time, and even if I had anything nasty, which I don't, it wouldn't harm you." She grinned at him, and he grinned back as he took in the impact of her words.

"Not that I want you to think... I mean, I might not have been a virgin but I'm not all that experienced," Lois added quickly, wanting to set the record straight.

"Lois, it doesn't matter to me," he insisted quickly. "I know you don't jump into bed with just anyone. Your... past just isn't relevant."

She lay down again, drawing him with her. "Superman... can I ask you a few things?" she ventured.

Clark closed his eyes briefly; this was where things got dangerous. Of course Lois would want personal details, it was only to be expected at this point in a relationship. And how could he avoid answering? It would look as if 'Superman' didn't trust her. He drew her onto his chest, beginning to stroke her hair lightly. "Okay, so what do you want to know?" he asked, preparing himself for the kind of questions he expected she would ask, the things she had always wanted to know about her hero.

But she surprised him once again. "I've been worried all day... what did you do about St John and the Kryptonite?"

"Oh!" Taken aback, he had to think for a moment before replying. "I went back there last night - after I'd finished with the other emergency. He and his... accomplice had managed to free themselves, I guess one of the others came back. Anyway, I found him alone in his office, and I warned him off - I suspected from his expression that he hadn't found the Kryptonite yet."

She stared up at him anxiously. "That'll be top of his list of priorities, Superman, you know that."

He nodded, but grinned suddenly. "I'm not sure he'll be able to, Lois. I sealed up the vent with my laser-vision." She stared at him again, amazed and delighted at his audacity.

But with the worry about the Kryptonite out of the way, Lois wanted to know more. Tracing patterns on his chest tentatively with her fingers, she spoke softly. "I've always wondered... what's your name? Your real name, I mean - when I asked you before, all you said was that Superman seemed to have caught on. And I guess since I came up with that name for you, I was sort of flattered, so I didn't ask you again...."

Clark sighed silently. How was he to answer that one? Of course, it was an opening to tell her the truth, but he was even more reluctant to take it. "Lois... the problem is that I don't know what my real name is. I told you I'm from Krypton, but that really is all I know about my origins. I assume my birth-parents named me something, but I

have no idea what that was."

She pulled away so that she could see his face, and he noticed an expression of something like relief in her eyes. "You don't know anything about Krypton... and you know, I was imagining that you had a girlfriend, or life partner or something there."

He smiled; on that at least he could reassure her. "If I do, I don't know about it, Lois."

She leaned up and kissed him, clearly happy with his answer. But that wasn't all; another question followed. "Superman... where do you go when you're not out... saving people?"

Dangerous territory again, Clark thought. He hesitated, and this time she saw his wary expression.

Her own expression grew anxious, and she spoke quickly. "I'm getting too pushy, aren't I? I'm sorry... there's so much I'd love to know about you, but I forget that you're a really private person... I don't want to intrude."

Clark felt torn; on the one hand he wanted to reassure her that she could ask him anything, and on the other he was scared that if he gave too much away he would betray his secret. "Lois... you know I love you," he told her sincerely. "I guess in a normal relationship that would give you the right to ask anything you want of me. And I wish I could answer all your questions. But... it's complicated." < And you can't get much more evasive than that, Kent! > he told himself grimly. Guilt was beginning to set in now; he was being reminded of his deceit at every turn.

In an attempt to shake off the feelings of guilt, he tugged Lois closer to him again and began to kiss her, lightly at first but then with increasing passion. She was only too happy to reciprocate, and their lovemaking was long and sensual, another new experience for him. But as she fell asleep in his arms afterwards, Clark lay awake, his conscience troubling him.

Shortly before dawn he heard sirens, and he silently slipped from her bed, feeling grateful that he would not have to face her when she awakened.

As the dawn light penetrated her bedroom curtains, Lois struggled to wakefulness. Briefly, she wondered why her body felt a little stiff and sore; then she remembered the events of the night before and falling asleep in Superman's arms after their second lovemaking. That had been long and slow and beautiful and sensual... just perfect.

She stretched out her arm towards his side of the bed, only to encounter empty space. Her eyes shot open - he was definitely gone. She grimaced; the downside to having a relationship with Superman, she supposed, was that she had to share him with the rest of the world. But since up until less than forty-eight hours ago she hadn't even dared to dream of becoming his lover, it was a small price to pay, she supposed.

Smiling secretly to herself, she headed for the shower; he would come again tonight, she hoped. He hadn't said that he would, but his behaviour had suggested... and anyway, he had actually used the word 'relationship' to her the previous evening. And if she was lucky, he wouldn't get called away - he might even be able to stay the entire night.

Clark prepared for work with mixed feelings. Being with Lois last night had been even better than the first time, he mused. She was so responsive, so warm and inviting; making love with her seemed so natural. But he couldn't help feeling guilty that he was deceiving her. She had actually given him a perfect opening to tell her the truth, but he hadn't been able to say the words. It wasn't just that he knew she didn't feel about Clark the way she did about Superman, but he also knew that by making love with her as Superman he had taken away her freedom of choice.

It was all very well reminding himself that she had assured him that she loved him, Superman. It was all very well reminding himself that she had done most of the running the first time, and that she had known full well what she was doing: he hadn't exactly seduced her, after all. But he had taken away her ability to choose. He was Clark Kent, after all, and Lois Lane had no idea that she was having a sexual relationship with her partner. Had she known that Clark and Superman were one and the same, she might well not have chosen to sleep with him.

< So that just makes it even harder to tell her the truth> Clark thought bitterly as he used his heat vision to shave himself. < But how long can I carry on being her lover at night and her partner and sort-of friend during the day?>

"Coffee, Lois?"

Lois glanced up from her computer screen. "Thanks, Clark. Any new leads on that missing plane?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. The air traffic control people still swear they've lost it, the coastguards can't find anything, and no-one's reporting any wreckage. It's almost as if it flew into the Bermuda Triangle."

As Clark watched her, she stared thoughtfully into space for a moment or two before replying. "Has anyone managed to contact Superman?"

Clark's mouth twisted at the question; he didn't care if she saw it, though in any case she would no doubt assume that he was jealous of her attitude to the Super-hero. "I'm not sure," he replied, avoiding her face. It wasn't true, of course; he had made a quick flight over the area where the plane had last been seen, and had already reported his findings - which had been precisely nothing - back to the police. Just for once, he'd thought, someone else can break a Superman story.

It was hard working with Lois today. The air of suppressed excitement

which she had borne the previous day was even more prominent today. When he had strolled into the Planet newsroom and seen her at her desk, he had badly wanted to go over to her and kiss her good morning, to be able to act in the proprietorial manner towards her which was the privilege of established partners - established lovers. But it wasn't Clark Kent who was her lover....

Later that afternoon, while Lois was going through the fine-tuning of their latest story with Clark, she noticed that he seemed a little abstracted. She ended their discussion of the matter at hand, then hesitated before deciding that they were supposed to be friends.

"Clark? Is everything all right?"

His head shot up and he met her gaze, his eyes stormy. "Fine. Shouldn't it be?"

Taken aback, she retreated a little. "Sure - I just thought, that is... well, as long as you're okay, that's fine."

Returning to her own desk, she mused that she would never understand Clark Kent. He continually seemed to blow hot and cold on her, and at times he plain *infuriated* her! He was a good writer, but sometimes... well, it was just as well Perry wasn't around, or Mr Kent would have found himself looking for a new partner. After all, she had only been showing that she cared about a friend; there had been no need to bite her head off!

Superman didn't visit her at all that night, and Lois spent most of her time in bed tossing and turning, wondering why he had stayed away. Had she asked too many questions the night before? Had she been too clinging? Or perhaps, despite what he'd said, he resented the fact that she'd had lovers before him?

When her radio alarm finally came on at six am, and she realised that Superman had spent most of the night assisting in the aftermath of an avalanche in northern Canada, her first thought was relief that she hadn't driven him away. Her second, and somewhat guilty, thought was to wonder about the victims - and about Superman. How had he coped? Did he find it difficult dealing with disaster after disaster, the deaths, injuries and devastation which resulted? She had to ask him, she resolved. If she saw him again.

At work, Clark was late; Perry growled a few times when he noticed that half of the Lane and Kent team was not at his desk. After the second time Perry had stalked out of his office to check whether Clark had shown up yet, Lois dialled the number of her partner's apartment. All she got was his answering machine. She left a brief message. "Clark, if you're there, Perry's on the warpath because you're not in. Are you sick or something? Call me."

He didn't call; but half an hour or so later he strolled down the ramp and into the bullpen as if there was nothing unusual about turning up for work after ten-thirty. Lois jumped up and caught his arm as he was on the way to his desk.

"Clark! Where the hell have you been?"

He turned his head and glanced at her, then briefly down at her hand on his arm. She released him, her surprise clearly showing on her face. "Sorry, Lois," he apologised wryly. "I should have called to say I was going to be late, but - "

"Yes, you should have! Perry's been after your blood for the past hour! He has an assignment for the two of us, and he's been waiting for you to get here."

Clark's eyelids lowered briefly under his glasses, and Lois noticed that he seemed really weary. Wondering what had caused it, she was about to express sympathy but then thought better of it after his reaction the previous day when he'd bitten her head off after she'd asked if he was okay. Stepping away from him, she remarked curtly, "You should try getting to bed earlier - alone."

< You try getting to bed when there's an avalanche to stop, Lois> Clark thought frustratedly. But he couldn't tell her that, of course.... Deliberately not rising to the bait, he said simply, "Tell Perry I have an exclusive interview with Superman about Canada. I think his new assignment will wait an hour or so while I write it up."

"*You* have an exclusive...?" Lois's expression was chagrined. Why had Superman chosen Clark? Why, given their new relationship, couldn't he have come and spoken to her? Come to that, Clark did appear to have the inside track on Superman sometimes - just how and when had that happened? She'd have to ask Superman about that... if she got the chance.

Clark saw the multiplicity of expressions flitting across Lois's face and grimaced. Of course she was annoyed that he, not she, had got the interview. Heck, she probably thought that now they were lovers he should give her all the exclusives! Well, if she didn't realise it now he would have to make very sure that she understood: for him to show her any sort of favouritism at all would suggest very clearly that she occupied a special position in his life. That would not do at all.

< Correction: *Superman* would have to make sure she understood> he thought grimly. Clark certainly couldn't!

He couldn't stay away. He had been wrestling with his conscience from the moment he'd said goodnight to Lois as they had left the Planet together. He'd seen the half-smile of anticipation on her face; knew that she was hoping that her lover would come to her again. And he knew what she hoped to do if he did; he knew that he wanted her to do it with him.

For the first time in his life, Clark was deliberately putting himself in a situation where he was doing something which he knew was wrong, and he wasn't about to stop doing it. His conscience was giving him quite a bit of trouble over it, but so far he had managed to tell it to shut up fairly successfully. He was aware, though, that he was avoiding the one thing which might have made him think twice about his decision to take Lois as his lover, as Superman. He hadn't spoken to his parents since before he had first slept with Lois.

He knew his parents, particularly his mother, well enough to know that they would realise something had changed in his life. He wouldn't be able to keep his relationship with Lois secret, that was for sure. And Martha and Jonathan would definitely not approve of the way it had happened.

< But I love her!> he protested. < And I'm not likely to get her as Clark Kent, am I? And I *am* Superman, and I do love her, so I'm not just saying it in order to get her into bed...>

< She's mine and I'm not giving her up> he insisted stubbornly to himself as he flew in the direction of her apartment.

"Superman! I... it's good to see you," Lois exclaimed as he pushed her window open and entered.

He strode towards her, his cape swishing behind him, and enveloped her in his arms, bringing his mouth down hard on hers. "I've missed you, Lois," he murmured as his kiss grew gentler, his lips caressing the corner of her mouth. < Yeah, sure!> his conscience scorned. < You said goodbye to her only a couple of hours ago!>

"I've missed you too, Superman," she whispered as she caressed his face, his shoulders. "Last night... when I heard where you'd been, I was worried about you."

"Worried? About me?" He seemed surprised. Had he ever had anyone worry about him before, Lois wondered. "Yes - oh, not worried for your safety, I didn't think you'd come into contact with... anything nasty. But you're always helping where people are killed, or horrifically injured...."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's hard sometimes." It was funny, he reflected; he hadn't expected Lois to think of that. He was really having to reassess his view of her Superman crush; he had thought until recently that all she saw was the superficial: the powers, the well-defined body, the mystery. But from the things she had been saying to him, it was clear that she also thought about the man under the Suit. It was just a pity that her thoughts didn't extend to the identity of that man... the fact that he was Clark Kent.

She wanted to guide him to the couch, but he resisted. When she gave him a questioning glance, he smiled wryly and explained. "Lois, those sofas of yours may look very stylish, but they're pretty uncomfortable, you know."

"So - what do you want to do?" She seemed at a loss.

He grinned suddenly. "If you want to sit down, that's not a problem." Before she could blink, he was sitting cross-legged in the air, his cape brushing the floor behind him, and his arms were reaching for her. He scooped her onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist to hold her close to him. "How's that?"

She giggled. "I can't believe I'm doing this!"

"Don't worry, I won't drop you," he teased.

She trailed tiny kisses along his jaw. "I know you won't, Superman. I trust you."

< Superman.... God, I wish she'd call me Clark> he found himself thinking. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind, instead nudging at her face until his mouth found hers. Several kisses later, he stretched out full-length in the air, arranging her body on top of his so that they were lying in each other's arms.

"Comfortable?"

"Mmmm. In fact, I don't think I'll bother going to bed tonight," she informed him. "I'll just sleep on you all night...."

He laughed softly. "Sounds great, sweetheart, but you know I'll probably get called away. In fact, I wanted to apologise for yesterday morning - there was a cry for help and I didn't want to wake you."

"There's no-one calling for help right now, is there?" she asked him as she deliberately drew her hand down the length of his chest and over his hips.

"Ummm... no," he admitted.

"So...?"

"Yes, Lois?" What was she getting at?

She plucked at his cape. "Much as I think you look great in this outfit, you look even better without it...."

That was a hint he had no difficulty at all in understanding. He lowered her to the floor and in a blur got undressed. When she was able to see him clearly again, he was standing in front of her just wearing his red briefs. He grinned at her. "You're a little over-dressed now, my love!"

She blushed. He really had a fantastic body, she thought; she still couldn't get over how magnificent he looked naked. His muscles were so well-defined, his skin brown and smooth as silk. "Okay." Wondering why she was so nervous, her hands went to the buttons on her blouse.

"Let me," he offered. She stood perfectly still as he moved around her; he was moving so fast she couldn't see what he was doing, but at the same time his touch was so gentle she barely felt it. Suddenly he stopped, and she glanced down at herself. Her clothes were neatly folded on her sofa, and she wore his cape wrapped around her.

She swallowed; it was such an intimate gesture. Raising her gaze to his, she said, "Take me to bed, Superman."

< I wish there was something else I could call him> she thought as he carried her into her bedroom. < It sounds so strange - I know it's what I've always called him, but I know it's not really his name.>

On the bed, he took slow, sensual pleasure in stripping his cape from her, easing it inch by inch from her body and covering the exposed areas with lingering kisses. By the time he had finished, she was aching for him; judging by the bulge in the front of his briefs, he felt the same way. She sat up, pushing him down on the bed, and grasped the waistband, pulling them down. His erection sprang up as she revealed it to her gaze.

They took their time; they were by now getting used to each other's bodies and enjoying the anticipation as much as the act itself. Clark wanted to explore and kiss every inch of Lois's body, and he loved having her do the same for him. By the time he finally lifted her to straddle him and take him inside her, both had climaxed several times and they were ready for long, slow lovemaking. His strong arms supported her; warning her of what he intended, he floated off the bed so that her feet could rest comfortably on the mattress, and she slid up and down on his erection as he bucked and thrust his hips rhythmically under her.

She was getting close; she let her head drop to his shoulder and he held her there, caressing her and murmuring endearments as he encouraged her on. He was learning to pace himself, to allow her to take her pleasure before he needed to take his, and he was getting pretty good at it. With his free hand, he slid a finger between their bodies and found her little nub. A couple of gentle, subtle strokes and she was crying out. The pulsating of her body brought on his own climax, and he cried out against her hair as he came again.

Floating gently back to the bed and under the covers a moment or two later, he wrapped his arms protectively around her, holding her closely against his side. "I love you, Lois," he murmured again, hoping she would still accept it if and when he managed to tell her the truth.

"I love you too, Superman," she whispered throatily, allowing her tongue to flick out at the sensitive muscle which throbbed in his throat.

Some time later, Lois drew back from her Super lover slightly, raising a hand to smooth his hair back from his forehead. Funny, she thought, he looks very different with his hair flopping forward like that.... "Superman, I've been wondering... well, you do have somewhere to go, don't you? I mean, I know you didn't want to answer the other day, and I promise I'm not trying to crowd you, but I wanted you to know that if you want to consider this place as your home, you're welcome...."

< Oh, Lois, it would be wonderful if we could move in together! Don't you know I'd marry you if you'd have me?> Clark swallowed, not knowing how to respond; after a few moments, he hugged her and said, "Lois, that's very thoughtful of you. But, as I've told you, the less I'm associated with you the safer you'll be.

True, but only in part, he told himself. As Clark, there would be no difficulty in spending time with her, even living with her. But at the moment, he couldn't see how that would be possible. Trying to distract himself from his thoughts, he covered her mouth with his own and instigated a long, passionate kiss which swiftly became more.

Later, as they lay together in the darkened bedroom, Lois traced circles on Superman's chest with her fingers. Despite the fact that this was now their third night together, she still felt immensely privileged, barely able to believe that the most powerful, most sought-after, being in the universe had chosen her as his lover. His *first* lover, too. It was incredible... and even more incredibly, he had told her - several times now - that he loved her.

Superman stirred slightly under her ministrations, reaching for and capturing her hand in his larger one. "Lois...?"

She smiled lovingly. "Yes, Superman?"

He squeezed her fingers gently. "Weren't you scared?" he asked her, an apparent non sequitur.

"Scared of what?" she asked him, not understanding.

"Me. That I might... hurt you." His voice was quiet, as if the very thought scared him, and she loved him even more for it. The man who always seemed to be so in control of every situation - and he was worried about what he might have done to her.

"Before we made love that first time," he explained. "You know what I'm capable of, Lois. Didn't it occur to you that I could crush you with one little finger?"

But she smiled in return. "I know how strong you are, Superman," she told him, meaning it. After all, she had seen him smash a solid concrete wall, and pick up a space shuttle in his bare hands. "But I also know how gentle you are. I've never known you hurt anyone. It never crossed my mind that you might harm me."

He was silent for a few moments, and she thought he was satisfied with her answer. But his next words made her realise that he had just been thinking. "Lois, I know how to control my powers. I've had to learn - it would be so easy for me to use just a little too much strength when I pick someone up, or even just shake their hand. So I've learnt through practice what a normal person can cope with. But the crucial thing is control... I am in control of my reactions most of the time. But when we make love... when I'm in the throes of passion... control could just go out of the window. I could - I could kill you in a second." He paused, and his eyes stared directly into hers. She caught her breath: there was the faint glimmer of a tear. "You never considered that?" he asked her.

Lois stroked his face in a gesture of love and reassurance.

"Superman... before that first night, I never even dreamed that you and I would be together like this. Oh, I suppose maybe I fantasised a little, but I never really got beyond wondering whether the Suit came off, what you looked like underneath it...." His expression asked silently whether she liked what she had found. The warmth of her gaze answered him equally silently.

"So, that night, when... when it happened, I never even thought of it. We'd been kissing, touching... you were so gentle, your touch was so magical, it never occurred to me that you wouldn't know how to control your strength. The first time I thought about the implications of making love with you - about your super-powers - was

when you said you didn't want to hurt me." Lois kissed his jaw caressingly as she finished her explanation.

He continued to stroke her silky skin. "It's something that's always worried me, Lois - that's one reason why I was... you know, inexperienced. But with you, I just couldn't help myself."

"But you didn't hurt me, Superman," she pointed out. "And I've never got the impression that you were holding back, that you weren't getting as much pleasure out of it as you could. Are you holding back?" she challenged.

"How can you ask that?" he demanded. "Lois, I don't know how it's been for you before - what it was like with your other lovers - but I couldn't imagine feeling anything better than we've experienced together."

< My other lovers...> Lois froze briefly. Despite what he'd said before, was he bothered by the fact that she'd had other men before him? "Superman... the other men I slept with... well, let's just say that until you I had pretty crummy taste in men."

He seemed to still; did he want to know more, or was he wishing she'd said nothing? When he spoke, his voice was soft, sympathetic. "Tell me, sweetheart. It sounds like you've been hurt in the past."

She swallowed, uncomfortable at the memory of past relationships, particularly with this best and most understanding of lovers beside her. "There's not much to tell, really. My first lover was a college boyfriend - he dumped me within a couple of months for a cheerleader type. And I never really enjoyed sex with him." She paused. "Then there was Claud - he was another reporter at the Planet. I got this really great exclusive - I stupidly told him about it, then allowed him to seduce me...."

"And he stole your story?" Superman finished enquiringly.

Lois stared up at him in surprise. "Yeah. How did you...?"

He seemed a little lost for words for a moment, then explained easily, "You're very protective of your work, Lois. It seemed... a logical explanation."

Lois accepted it, her thoughts elsewhere. "So you see, Superman, until we made love sex was never very good for me."

"Ah," he observed. "So at least I'm a first for you in some respects."

He was silent for a few minutes, then spoke in a different tone. "Lois, I hope you understood why I gave Clark the interview about the avalanche."

"Ummm... yeah, I guess so..." Lois replied half-heartedly. She didn't really, and was still a little resentful about missing that story.

His arms tightened about her. "It's quite simple, Lois. I think now we're lovers I need to be much more careful about not singling you out for any special attention. That doesn't mean you won't get

exclusives from me, but there might be less than in the past." He was silent for a few moments as she assimilated this new information, then added with a half-smile, "Lois, which would you prefer?"

Her eyes flashed at him as she contemplated hitting him with one of her pillows, then she discarded the idea on the basis that the stuffing was likely to end up all over the bedroom. It was no contest really, she concluded. To be Superman's lover, but lose a few exclusive interviews? She'd give up the interviews. Like a shot.

Over the following couple of weeks, Lois became more accustomed to her nightly visitor. He didn't come every night, and occasionally he arrived only to leave again shortly afterwards when he heard a cry for help. But when he could, he stayed for most of the night. Lois's only regret was that he never stayed with her until morning.

She was finding out more about him as well; he seemed to trust her more, and to relax in front of her. One evening he showed her how he shaved and cut his hair: that heat vision was simply amazing, she thought, and reinforced her view when he used it on her in their lovemaking. He was a wonderfully inventive lover, and when she had joked that she was cold floating above the bed with no clothes on, he had swept her body lightly with his heat vision: it had felt as if she was lying on a sunny beach, though the effect was much less harmful, she presumed.

He still didn't talk much about the minutiae of his life when he was neither with her nor dealing with an emergency. Sometimes he talked about his emotions, however, and when he confessed to having felt desperately lonely at many times in his life, she had simply wanted to hold him tightly and assure him that he would never be lonely again as long as she was alive. He had kissed her then and told her again, in an almost desperate tone, how much he loved her.

The only fly in the ointment in relation to her life at present, she mused, was Clark. She couldn't figure what was wrong with him. In recent weeks they had moved from being partners who just about managed to get along to being good friends - in fact, Lois, who had never had a best friend before let alone a close friend who was male, had come to regard him as her best friend. But he had become distant with her recently, and there was a strange coolness in his manner which she had never encountered before from him. At first she had thought that there was something wrong, something which was worrying him, but he had rebuffed all her attempts to talk to him about it and so she had given up. But she missed his annoying cheerfulness, the good humour which had frequently chivvied her out of bad moods, his appalling jokes and... she had to admit, his very charming smile. These days, that smile was very rarely seen.

Perhaps he was homesick; maybe he'd got fed up with the big city and wanted to go home to Smallville. Strangely, that thought made Lois feel depressed. But she couldn't understand why that prospect should affect her in that way... Kent was nobody special, was he?

Her instinct recoiled against that idea. She remembered the time when Clark had handed in his resignation to take up a post as Editor of the Smallville Post. It had been a very strange career move for

someone who had made a great start at Metropolis's greatest newspaper. After he'd returned, she had only been able to assume that he must have been affected in some weird way by the heat. But what had been so odd about that incident was that she had *missed* him! Missed the hack from Nowheresville! And she had been very pleased to see him come back. Since then, she wasn't quite sure how it had happened but he had become a very close friend.

Something else was... disturbing... about that incident, she remembered uncomfortably. He had kissed her when he'd said goodbye. And she had enjoyed the kiss; she had experienced a sensation of warmth at the touch of his lips, and she had - almost - opened her mouth to deepen it. But he had withdrawn from her quickly, as if he had been afraid she would push him away.

Why would Clark's kiss affect her, anyway? She couldn't understand that. But then... there had been the time when *she* had kissed *him,* when the madman Trask had wanted to push them both out of a plane. He had kissed her back then, and for a second it had been tempting to deepen the contact... but that had only been because they had both believed they were going to die, she rationalised. That was all it was.

But then he had kissed her at the Lexor, when they had been undercover as honeymooners. And *that* kiss had packed a punch, even more so because his hard, muscular body had been on top of hers, pinning her down onto the bed. After her initial shock, she had begun to respond to him, only to realise that he had only kissed her as a diversion because, somehow, he had heard the chambermaid approaching.

She pushed those thoughts from her mind. Why was she concentrating on Clark's physical attractiveness or otherwise, anyway? She wasn't contemplating taking Clark as a lover, for heaven's sake! She had a lover, and she had no desire to swap Superman any time soon.

But that still didn't solve the mystery of Clark's strange manner. Why had his behaviour changed so much? She frowned as she tried to think the problem through. What could have upset him so much?

She could only think of one thing which, in the past, had caused Clark to become sullen or annoyed, and that was her attraction to Superman. Clark had a bit of a jealous streak, which she considered to be totally unjustified where she was concerned. She had told him shortly after they met not to fall for her; she had also later told him that she made it a rule not to date anyone she worked with. So if he did have a crush on her, he only had himself to blame. It was just such a shame to wreck their friendship over it.

She wondered whether Superman had told Clark they were lovers; she couldn't figure out any other way that he could have guessed. But on the other hand, would that explain why he seemed to be moody with everyone lately, if it was just her he was upset with?

But the confusing thing was that there were also times, despite the coolness, when she caught him looking at her, just staring, with what looked like a yearning expression on his face... Just what was going on with him?

Coming to wakefulness in his own apartment, Clark reluctantly dragged himself out of bed. This lifestyle was taking its toll on him, he thought, and he wondered idly how on earth Lois, with her human metabolism, was managing to stay awake. He was doing a full day's work at the Planet, disappearing to be Superman as needed, then going over to Lois's apartment in the late evening to spend a few hours with her, making love and talking, before returning to his own apartment at around three or four in the morning. And that was when he wasn't needed as Superman for some major emergency during the night.

Not that he was regretting being Lois's lover... it was just that he wished, really longed to be *himself* with her. Not the Super-hero, but Clark. The problem was that the longer he carried on this deception the harder it would be to tell her the truth. He might possibly have got away with it if he'd told her on the second night; he could have said that he'd just got carried away, and then the emergency had prevented him from telling her the truth after they'd made love. But now that he had been her lover for more than two weeks it would be almost impossible to come up with a plausible explanation for his failure to tell her - at least, an explanation which would leave him with some possibility that she might forgive him.

He sighed heavily and prepared himself for work. Work... that was a situation fraught with disaster these days. It was so difficult to spend hours making love with Lois, then to arrive in the newsroom a few short hours afterwards and have her treat him as no more than a friend, a colleague. He had found himself increasingly forced to be restrained around her; if he relaxed and behaved normally, he would be very likely to make a mistake, call her 'sweetheart' or one of the other endearments he used during their nights together. When greeting her, it would be so easy to bend and kiss her in the way which now felt so natural, the way he did when he arrived at her apartment. And when they were out together, walking side by side, it would be so easy to take her hand, or place his arm around her shoulders, as he tended to on occasions when they sat together at her apartment, or when he took her flying to remote places where they could stroll together, confident in the knowledge that they would not be seen.

Yes, it would be too easy to make a slip like that... so he had to keep his distance, retreat into himself, abandon his normal casual good humour and ensure that he was continually in control of his reactions.

And, regardless of how often he told himself that it wasn't really Lois's fault, he occasionally found himself blaming her for this impossible situation. If she hadn't fallen head-over-heels for Superman, if she hadn't rejected Clark Kent, if she wasn't too blind to see what was under her nose.... But that line of thought didn't get him anywhere, he knew that. It was just that it was hard not to look at her sometimes, at the Planet, and not think those accusing thoughts.

Those same accusations also floated into his mind at odd moments when he was with her as Superman, and he had to force himself to put them from his consciousness. To listen too closely might lead him to make a decision he didn't want to make... yet. He loved Lois, after all. If he allowed himself to focus too closely on those feelings of

resentment towards her, he would have to finish their relationship. He could also find himself tempted to tell her the truth, but in a manner and in circumstances which neither would find it easy to forgive.

Clark flew swiftly towards Lois's apartment, wondering what he would say to her this time. He knew that she was hurt at his failure to tell her much about himself, but of course there were reasons why that was not possible. But now... now, today, he knew so much more about the Kryptonian side of himself. And he was desperate to tell someone about his new-found knowledge.

He felt a twinge of guilt that he wasn't flying to Smallville to tell his parents. Under normal circumstances that would of course be his destination, but he was still finding it difficult to talk to Jonathan and Martha. He had spoken to them in the past couple of weeks, of course, but the conversations had been brief, his manner strained. He was aware that they wondered what was wrong, but he just found himself unable to confide in them. He was well aware of what their reaction would be.

Lois's window was open, as usual, and he glided through and strode through the living-area. She wasn't there, and he paused for a moment, listening. His lips curved into a smile; she was in the bedroom, and by the sound of it was dressing... or undressing. He decided that it would be fairer to announce his presence.

"Lois?"

She came hurrying out of the bedroom. "Superman!"

He was in front of her in an instant, and she was in his arms, swept off her feet. She raised her face for his kiss, and he obliged happily. Releasing her, his gaze swept her body. She wore a filmy robe, and he couldn't resist using his Super-vision to see what was underneath. He hardened instantly as he saw a black camisole and French knickers.

Stepping away from her, he enquired with one eyebrow raised, "Are you expecting someone, by any chance?"

She swatted at his arm with her hand. "Well, I just thought that maybe some handsome hunk of a Kryptonian might come flying through my window...." Her eyelids lowered coyly as she threw him a teasing smile.

"Just any Kryptonian?" he teased her in return.

"Well, I don't know any others - do you?"

Clark hesitated; he knew more now than he had before. And he wanted to tell her about it, but his body had more urgent demands. He pulled her soft body against his, allowing her to feel the hard ridge of his erection. "Do you feel like doing something about this?"

She laughed softly, easing her hand between their two bodies and caressing his shaft. "You want me to? And what do I get in return?"

"A night flight over Metropolis? Long, slow lovemaking on a beach in the Bahamas? Passion on the ceiling?" he suggested with an exaggerated leer.

"The Bahamas sounds interesting - maybe some other time," Lois grinned. "Come on, Superman, you need to get rid of that Suit!"

He needed her that night; Clark couldn't have put into words just how much he needed her love and her comfort after what he had learned about himself. The knowledge he now had of his parents - his real parents - and the sacrifice they had made for him; the knowledge that they had known their deaths were imminent, and so they had worked frantically to ensure that their son would live, albeit in a far galaxy with no other members of his own race around him.

He allowed her to help him undress; he had shown her some time before where the various fastenings of the Suit were located, and she was getting better at undoing it. She seemed to sense that he had something on his mind, and her attentions were more loving, more caring as a result. As she uncovered his body to her view, she bent her head and trailed kisses over what seemed like every inch of him.

Finally he was naked; he pushed her robe from her shoulders and gazed at the sight of her in her black lingerie. "You are beautiful, sweetheart," he murmured huskily as his large hands gently caressed her shoulders and the tempting curve of her breasts which was just visible above the camisole.

"So are you," she whispered in reply, gazing at the angled planes of his face, the curved muscles of his pectorals and upper arms, the sheer magnificence of his proud erection. She slipped from his arms and slid down his body, taking his penis in her hand. Fondling him lightly, she bent towards him and her tongue flicked out, teasing the tip before she took him into her mouth.

A feeling that she was somehow weightless followed; Lois was getting used to this by now. He frequently floated off the bed during their lovemaking, taking her with him, and the sheer inventiveness of his use of his powers made things incredibly exciting. She glanced around; he was holding her by the waist, though he himself was still lying on the bed. Holding her aloft with one hand, he tugged her gently with the other until she was lying flat on her stomach, facing away from him; then he lowered her again onto his chest.

Guiding her head back towards his erection with his hand, he indicated that he wanted her to continue what she had started. Letting her lips glide down over him again, she suddenly stilled as she realised what he was doing. He had parted her legs, and had begun to caress her very gently with his fingers; now he was using his tongue on her, licking and sucking her very secret centre. He found her little nub, now hardened and throbbing; his tongue rasped over it once and she gasped, involuntarily allowing her teeth to graze him. Muttering an embarrassed apology, she let him slide from her mouth; he laughed.

"I guess that's one advantage in being invulnerable, my love!"

"You mean... it didn't hurt?" she exclaimed, relieved.

"No, not at all, I promise," he assured her. His tongue flicked over her clitoris again, and she cried out.

Two could play at that game, she decided, and she again reached for him with her lips. This time she wasn't going to take it gently; timing her strokes carefully, she took full advantage of her ability to drive him wild with excitement. He seemed to realise what she was up to, and his ministrations between her legs grew more thorough, bringing her very close to a climax.

Suddenly, just as she estimated that he was very close to his own climax, he lifted her again. Before she even had time to wonder what he intended, he held them both upright, floating in mid-air, and wrapped her legs about his hips as he settled her over his erection. Entering her in one single thrust, he rocked his pelvis back and forth urgently until she cried out, brought to orgasm by her already aroused state and the sensation of him deep inside her. A bare second later, he moaned and spilled into her.

Lois was amazed at her lover's control; even in the throes of his own orgasm, he was still able to keep the two of them floating in seeming suspended animation above the bed. As he came back to full awareness, he stroked the hair away from her forehead and gazed into her eyes, checking without words that she was all right before shifting her position and gently lowering them to the bed again.

They lay in silence for a few minutes, wrapped in each other's arms with her head on his chest, her favourite position after lovemaking. Lois remembered her conviction, shortly after his arrival, that there was something on his mind, and wondered whether he'd had to assist at something horrible. There had been times over the past couple of weeks when he had come to her after some heart-wrenching disaster, and he had needed the comfort of her arms. He would now tell her about things he had seen and done, rather than keeping his emotions bottled up inside out of some chivalrous notion of protecting her.

She shifted, and gazed at him. "Superman? Is everything all right?"

He smiled down at her, his expression tender. "Lois...." His voice sounded oddly tentative. "Lois, you don't have to keep calling me Superman any more. My name is... my name is Kal-El."

She gasped, her eyes widening. Superman was finally opening up to her, confiding in her! "Kal-El... you don't have to worry that I'll ever tell anyone else that," she promised, her voice and expression sincere.

"I know that," he assured her, his deep voice also sincere. He stroked her hair for a few moments in silence.

Lois was remembering what he had said to her before. "Sup... Kal-El, you said before that you didn't know what your real name was...." Had he been keeping things back from her, then?

But he nodded. "I didn't. Something... happened today, Lois, and I wanted... needed to tell someone about it." Quietly, he related the story of the globe, omitting the details of where he had found it and

allowing her to assume that he had always had it. He described the map of Krypton, the images of Jor-El and Lara which had appeared to him, the laboratory in which they had worked steadily and with increased desperation as their planet disintegrated around them.

"And so they sent me here for my own safety," he concluded. "If they hadn't done that, I'd have died too."

"And I'd never have met you," she concluded softly. "My God, Super... Kal-El, I couldn't bear that - for you to have died then...."

He gave her a lop-sided smile. "You'd never have known, Lois. If we'd never met, we couldn't have fallen in love; it's as simple as that."

But she was shaking her head. "I can't explain it, Kal-El - something's been telling me that we were meant to meet, to be together, since our first night together. And I know I loved you from the moment I saw you."

< So did I, Lois...> Clark thought. "Maybe... I don't know. We are pretty good together - and I know that I couldn't have borne it if anything had happened to you that night...." He trailed off, unsure whether to say more; he felt, as Lois did, that there was something tying them together; a sense that they were destined for each other. But how could that be the case when she didn't know who he really was, when she didn't feel anything for Clark Kent?

She wrapped her arms around him, reassuring him with her embrace and dozens of tiny kisses that she was safe. Some moments later, she paused and stared at him.

"Kal-El... you said you were a baby when your parents sent you to Earth - how long did the journey take?"

Clark gave her a wry smile. "Lois, if I'd ever doubted your skill as a journalist, you keep reminding me! I don't know how long the journey took, but from what I'm aware, I was about three months old when the spaceship landed here, on Earth. By the look of the baby in the hologram, I was about a month to six weeks old on Krypton."

< He came here as a baby!> Lois was barely able to believe what she was hearing. "But... I've always assumed you came here shortly before you saved the Messenger...."

His voice was quiet, almost apologetic. "I know you have, Lois, and so has everyone else. I encouraged that belief. It was safer that way. But you must have guessed, from some of the things I've told you over the last couple of weeks, that I'd been here longer than that." He paused, wondering how much else he could safely tell her.

Lois was silent for a few minutes. Of course, she'd always known that Superman was holding out on her in so many ways, even since they'd become lovers, and she had accepted that. Now that he was beginning to tell her the truth, what right had she to feel upset or excluded? Of course he hadn't told her any of this before! Earlier, before they'd been lovers, he had been forced to be secretive about so much of himself: after all, how could he know that she wouldn't use it in an award-winning story? She was a journalist after all. Now he was

finally letting down his guard, telling her things which she imagined he had never told anyone else. Her hurt dissipated, to be replaced by an immense sense of privilege.

"Kal-El... that's incredible," she breathed. "But you were a baby - how on earth did you survive?"

He paused again, and again she wondered whether he was debating with himself how much to tell her. At length he spoke. "I was found... by a terrific couple. They had no kids of their own, and they'd always wanted.... Anyway, they brought me up, though they had no idea who I was or where I'd come from." He paused again and Lois stroked his face, sensing that his life couldn't have been easy. "They got a heck of a shock when I started seeing through walls and setting things on fire by looking at them!"

Lois exclaimed in disbelief. "What on earth did they think?"

He shrugged. "We didn't know what to think. My parents... my adoptive parents, that is, thought I might be a government experiment or something. It wasn't until I found the globe that I knew I was from Krypton."

"They must be pretty incredible people," Lois murmured. "I'd love to meet them."

He was silent again for a few moments, and again she thought she had trespassed. Then he said quietly, "Maybe you will one day."

She traced circles on his chest with her fingertip; she loved doing that. His skin felt so soft beneath her touch, and yet he was invulnerable. Then, choosing her words carefully, she ventured, "But... your adoptive parents, they must have called you something?"

Clark stilled; now he really had given too much away. He so badly wanted to be able to tell her everything, but he knew he'd left it far too late in their relationship. If he told her the truth now, that would be the end of everything; she wouldn't forgive him. How could she? He would probably even have to leave Metropolis.

Closing his eyes briefly as if hoping for inspiration, he chose his words carefully. "Yeah. They named me. So I guess you could say I lied to you before when you asked me my name - lied by omission, anyway. I told you I didn't know what my Kryptonian name was, and that was true."

Hurt, Lois sat up; his arms fell from around her as he made no attempt to draw her back down to him. "S... Kal-El, I can understand your not telling me any of this stuff before, but - well, it hurts when you *know* how much I love you, and you can't even tell me the name you've lived under for most of your life!" Probably still live under, she added silently; this could be the answer to her question about where he went when he wasn't rescuing someone as Superman. If he had a human identity, then he was probably disguised as that person. In fact... in fact, he probably had a whole other life as that person, whoever he was! And she had known nothing about it; he had been shutting her out far more than she had ever guessed. And he claimed to love her?

Clark closed his eyes again momentarily. "Lois, you know I love you. Besides my parents, you are the most important person in my life. I've told you things about me that no-one else knows, and if that doesn't tell you I trust you then I don't know what would. But my parents... well, they mean a lot to me, and I have to protect them, the same way as I need to protect you. If anyone knew who they are... well, you can imagine." Seeing the flash of anger on her face, he continued quickly, "Lois, I don't for one second imagine you would betray me or them. But I have to think of them. They don't know about you, and I can't tell you anything which could identify them without their permission." He grimaced; again he was having to lie to her, or fob her off with half-truths. How long could he keep doing this?

Lois turned away from him and was silent for a long time, so long that Clark reached for his Suit and began dressing, at normal speed rather than Super-speed. "I'd better go," he murmured at last as he attached his cape to the back of the outfit.

She turned to face him at last, and he saw that there were tears rolling down her cheeks. "Don't go, Kal-El," she whispered; it was all he could do to stop himself taking her in his arms and asking her to call him Clark.

He clenched and unclenched his fists. "Lois... I don't know what more I can say. I know there are things I'm not telling you, and I know you're entitled to feel shut out. I just wish...." He trailed off. < I wish things could be different....>

She swallowed, and dragged the back of her hand across her eyes. "I suppose that's the price I have to pay for being Superman's mistress."

Clark felt as if she had slapped him. "Lois! Never... *never* call yourself that again!"

She met his gaze, her eyes challenging. "Isn't that what I am?"

Shaking his head, he denied her words. "No. No, not that. Never.... You... do I really make you feel like that?" he demanded, horrified.

"Like a mistress? I guess that depends on how you see a mistress," Lois answered him quietly.

Clark sat on the edge of the bed, not touching her. "A kept woman... someone I'd just visit for sex..." He trailed off, realising that his words were only incriminating himself.

"Well, you don't keep me, but otherwise...." Lois threw him a meaningful glance.

Shaking his head furiously to deny her words, Clark spoke abruptly. "I'm very sorry if I've ever made you feel like that, Lois. I can only swear to you that I have *never* thought of you as a... in that way. I *love* you!" he insisted. "We're lovers... you are my partner, and I am yours. At least, that's what I believed."

Lois's mouth twisted. "I don't feel like your girlfriend," she told

him quietly, then as she saw him wince at her words, she stretched out her hand to him in a gesture of conciliation. "Look, I knew it would be like this. I knew we could never do the things together that ordinary couples do - go to the movies, out to dinner, away for the weekend... but that was when I thought you were Superman all the time. And now it seems you've had another identity all along. That you have a name... a family... and probably somewhere you go when you're not with me. And I wonder why you can't tell me... I mean, if you do have another identity, a disguise, why can't we use that to be a normal couple sometimes?"

Clark took a sharp intake of breath. He could tell her, now... he could say those five words: 'My name is Clark Kent.' And then he would have told her everything; and then he would have to watch her walk out of his life.

For a brief moment the words were on the tip of his tongue. He imagined the range of possible responses, from rage to tears to coldness. She might scream at him. She might demand that he leave and never come back. She might threaten to tell the world his secret... no, he knew she would not do that. She might say she never wanted to see him again, either as Superman or as Clark. She might... she might forgive him, and say that she loved him whatever his name was.

And maybe Lex Luthor was a genuine philanthropist!

He knew he was going to do it even before the words came to his lips. He took the coward's way out.

"Lois, I can't tell you my... other name. Not now. I wish I could, but like I told you.... Maybe some day. And maybe we can do the things you want together." He took a shuddering breath. "I have to go."

Lois withdrew her hand, feeling the pain of rejection. Reaching for her robe, she slipped it on and spoke in an expressionless voice. "Okay. See you around."

Clark froze at her words, her tone. Was she saying that she didn't want him to come to her apartment again? But he began to walk, slowly, towards the bedroom door and beyond it, to the apartment window.

As he was about to launch into flight, his Super-hearing picked up a little choking sound.

His heart constricting, he was back in the bedroom in an instant. She was on the bed, curled up in the foetal position, sobbing desperately.

A lump formed in his throat. Clark lowered himself silently onto the bed beside her and scooped her into his arms, cradling her against his heart. She curled herself into the curve of his body, and he felt her tears against his throat.

"Lois... Lois, sweetheart, I never meant to make you cry.... Please don't cry. Please... I love you. I love you more than I could ever tell you...." Murmuring endearments and pleas, he held her until her sobs eased and the tears dried.

Much later, Lois lay awake, brooding over what had happened. Their first argument, and it had almost broken them up, she felt. She had been entitled to feel shut out, certainly, and he had even admitted that. But she had shocked herself as much as Superman when she had described herself as his mistress. She had certainly never thought of herself in that way beforehand, but once she had used the word it began to seem apt. Even more so once she had become aware that he had a completely different life about which she knew nothing at all.

It all made perfect sense now: how it was that no-one ever saw Superman unless he was helping at an emergency or attending some official function. No-one ever just ran into him grocery shopping, or met him at the movies. No-one announced that he was their next-door neighbour. So, unless he lived in some remote cave somewhere, it seemed perfectly rational that he should have some other identity, a disguise. And it had to be a good disguise, otherwise he would have been found out by now. He had to be somewhere, leading what seemed to be a perfectly ordinary life. Family; friends; a girlfriend... no, no girlfriend, she corrected herself. He'd been a virgin, after all. Unless... he had told her that he'd been reluctant to have sex with anyone before her, in case he accidentally hurt his partner. Or could it be that he hadn't wanted his partner to realise that she was with Superman? Either way, he could have a girlfriend she knew nothing about.

What kind of job would Superman in disguise have? Assuming he had a job, that is; he'd have to find some way of making a living, she supposed. Given that he seemed to have no difficulty getting away to go to emergencies, he had to have the kind of work where comings and goings weren't noticed. Perhaps he was a writer, she mused; a novelist? Working at home, alone; she supposed that he would probably be able to type at Super-speed.

She shrugged. He had told her that he would answer all her questions some day soon, and she believed him. After he had dried her tears and made her a hot drink, he had taken her into the living-room and sat on the couch with her curled up on his lap. Then he had told her, quietly and sincerely, that he was very sorry that he'd made her cry - he'd even said that the sound of her distress had torn at his heart. He'd told her over and over how much he loved her, and that he wanted them to be together, not just for a few hours each night whenever he could come to her, but all the time. He'd said that there were things he needed to sort out before he could tell her everything, and that he was also afraid.

"Afraid, Kal?" Their conversation echoed in her mind.

"Yes. Afraid that once you know the truth you won't want me...." He had trailed off then, seemingly reluctant to say more. She had had to strain to hear his words as it was.

"Kal... I love you. That means nothing you could tell me would change my feelings for you," she had assured him, clinging to him.

He had fallen silent, burying his face in her hair. After several minutes he had sighed deeply and had then drawn his head back to catch and hold her gaze, his brown eyes sad. It had seemed as if he had made a momentous decision, and was going to say something of

great importance.

Then his head had turned and he had assumed a faraway expression, something which Lois was getting used to. "Someone needs you, Kal-El?"

He had sighed again. "Yes. I have to go, Lois."

Before leaving, he had kissed her hard, holding her as if he never wanted to let her go. Then he had flown off, leaving her feeling confused and with more questions than she had ever had before about him.

< I should never have started this> Clark told himself as he returned to his apartment several hours later. < I'm in too deep now... how could I possibly tell her the truth and explain why I didn't do it before?>

He threw himself onto his bed without bothering to undress; it would be light in a couple of hours anyway. He allowed his eyes to close as he reflected on their argument. He had come so close to telling her - if he hadn't heard those sirens, hadn't realised that there was a major fire at the docks, he would have told her he was Clark. It had been tempting: after all, she had assured him that she loved him and nothing could change that.

< Yeah... nothing except discovering that your best friend has been lying to you all along... that he took advantage of your ignorance, and your Superman crush, to get you into bed... that he carried on lying to you and sleeping with you for nearly three weeks... how would that make you feel towards me, my love?>

But he had already told Lois almost everything else about himself: she knew that he had another identity, though she assumed that it was the disguise, rather than the Superman persona. She was aware that he had grown up on Earth, with adoptive parents. She had guessed that he had a home somewhere, and she had probably worked out that he had a job.

Lois was the smartest person he knew - except in one respect. Given that she spent so much time with him as Clark, given that she was his best friend, given that he had talked to her about himself more than anyone else in Metropolis, how was it that she hadn't worked out that Clark Kent had a secret? How come she had never noticed the physical resemblance between him and Superman? How come she never seemed to wonder where he went when he vanished at short notice? Why was it she never wondered how it was he could contact Superman, how he got Superman exclusives other reporters missed?

How - since she claimed to love Superman, to feel some sort of bond with him - did she not feel that same bond with Clark?

Perhaps she didn't really love him, the tiny aggravating voice inside his head challenged him. Perhaps it was just the Super-powers after all. Perhaps she's dazzled by what Superman can do, excited by the thought that she, and only she, has the power to arouse him.

He dashed the annoying voice away. Lois wasn't some Superman groupie!

She really did care for him; she had shown that on several occasions when she had empathised with his pain after a traumatic emergency. Her lovemaking was very unselfish, and although she loved climaxing in his arms, she seemed to gain as much pleasure from simply lying in his arms and stroking him.

What were her feelings for him? How could he explain the fact that she didn't feel that way about him as Clark?

He couldn't answer that question, and something insidious started to eat away inside him. Without realising it, he began to doubt Lois's feelings towards him, and the viability of their relationship.

"Well, that was a complete waste of time!" Lois was so furious that she stormed out of the building, barely pausing to check that Clark was following her.

"Hey, it happens," Clark replied placatingly; Lois in a blazing temper was not something he really wanted to cope with on their journey back to the Planet. They had come in her Jeep, and she would insist on driving back; then she would drive like a maniac, cutting up every other driver on the road, running amber lights and yelling at anyone who dared challenge her. "We were given the wrong information. You know sometimes leads just don't pan out."

"Yeah, but we've wasted all damn morning on this!" she retorted, her eyes flashing at her partner. But simultaneously something registered with her. Clark was actually being sympathetic; he was showing some concern for her state of mind. He was behaving like her friend again.

Her anger disappeared in an instant; placing her hand on Clark's forearm, she suggested, "Hey partner, I know a pretty good deli just around the corner. Want to get some lunch before we go back?"

Clark seemed to hesitate before agreeing. "Okay then, lead the way. I guess I could cope with a sandwich."

"When can't you cope with food, Clark Kent?!" she exclaimed. "I've never known anyone who can eat like you and still stay in shape." Pretty great shape too, she mused in surprise as her eyes trailed over his body. Even concealed by his business suit, it was clearly hard, muscular, lean... his stomach was flat and his pectorals suggested that he worked out pretty frequently. She stole a quick glance behind; his buttocks weren't bad at all either. In fact, he had a pretty great physique, nearly as good as.... What was she thinking? Clark was nothing like Superman!

Clark watched Lois warily out of the corner of his eye; he could hardly believe what he was seeing. Was she really checking him out? Had she just sneaked a look at his backside? What the hell was she up to? He glanced at her face and saw an expression of appalled curiosity there. She couldn't have... no. No, she hadn't figured out his secret. He knew Lois only too well: if she had worked it out, she'd be screaming at him or lashing out with her fists by now.

In an attempt to distract her, he answered her rhetorical question.

"I guess I just have a fast metabolism, Lois. I don't seem to put on weight."

Forcing herself to focus on the here and now, Lois led the way to the deli. But she mused on his reply to her, realising that it was the first time in the past couple of weeks that he had actually answered a personal question. His usual response now was to withdraw into himself, or find some means of telling her to mind her own business. It was so nice to have her friend back.... Hoping he wouldn't rebuff her, she slipped her arm through his as they walked.

Clark was shocked to feel Lois taking his arm. He had been walking beside her wishing that he could hold her hand or draw her closer to him; then suddenly she had taken the initiative. He glanced down at her, taking in the light-hearted expression, the smile which suggested that all was right in the Lane universe. She was probably thinking about Superman, he thought bitterly.

In the deli, they ordered quickly and their sandwiches arrived within minutes. The conversation was impersonal at first as they discussed the next steps in their current investigation. Then Lois stretched a hand across the table to cover Clark's larger one.

"Clark, what's wrong?"

His head jerked up in shock. "What do you mean, Lois? Nothing's wrong."

"Oh, come on, Clark! Do you really think you can fool me? A three-times Kerth award-winning investigative journalist? Besides, I *know* you."

"Oh, you do, do you?" His tone was cynical, and he instantly regretted allowing that emotion to seep through as he saw her eyebrows lift. "Look, Lois, I know you're damn good at your job. I've never doubted it. But when it comes to people I don't think you're so good at figuring things out." < You sure haven't figured me out...> He grimaced inwardly; he needed to stop saying things like that. It would only make her even more suspicious.

Her eyes flashed briefly. "Look, Clark, I really don't know what it is I've done, but it's pretty obvious from your behaviour towards me lately that I've hurt or offended you in some way. But we're supposed to be friends, so can't we sort this out? Can't I just say I'm sorry for whatever it is, or are you going to carry on with this until I work out for myself what I've done wrong?"

Glaring at her, Clark retorted, "That's really great, Lois, make it sound like I'm sulking!"

"Oh, come on, Clark, you're a master at the art!" she snapped at him, angry at his refusal to discuss the issue.

That was enough for him; he got to his feet and, without looking at her, went over to the counter to pay the bill. She waited at the table, hoping that he would calm down and that they could continue the discussion, but when he'd finished he walked straight to the door. She had to scramble to her feet and hurry after him. As she exited the deli, she noticed that he was already several yards down the road.

"Clark? Clark, wait for me!"

He didn't glance back, but his pace slowed a little. She caught up with him and grabbed at his arm. "Look, Clark, I'm sorry I said that. I didn't mean it - "

"No?" His tone and expression were cold. "It sounded pretty much like it to me."

"I was lashing out, I guess. I was... angry that you wouldn't talk to me," she explained, trying to heal the breach her words had caused.

He barely glanced at her. "Lois, I'm not sure I have anything I want to say to you," he replied briefly.

She stared at him. How had things between them got to this state? All she had imagined was that she had done something to upset him, or that he knew about her relationship with Superman and was jealous. But this seemed to indicate that things were much more serious than she had dreamed. She was on the verge of losing her best friend... and it was only now that she realised how much that friendship meant to her.

"Clark...." The word was little more than a whisper, the tone almost pleading. "Clark, you're my best friend, I really care about you - how can this be happening...?"

He seemed to still, his body tensing as if he was dealing with some internal conflict. Then he turned to her, and his face was like a mask. "You've trodden my feelings into the mud so many times... I'm just not sure I care any more."

Feeling as if he had taken her heart in his fist and squeezed, Lois could only stare at him. Before she could react, he had turned on his heel and walked off; by the time she managed to hurry after him, he had turned a corner and disappeared.

She ran to the Jeep and drove home, shaking.

What had he been thinking of? Why had he said that to Lois? Clark couldn't understand why he had reacted in that way. All she had done was to ask what was wrong, and he couldn't fault her on that. He *had* been acting oddly around her lately as Clark - as Superman as well, though she wasn't of course aware that he was Superman.

He had lashed out at her, hurting her cruelly and undeservedly. She had shown him concern, and he had accused her of suggesting that he was sulking. He had walked out on her. He had told her he had nothing to say to her. And worst of all, he had said he didn't care any more, before abandoning her.

It was a lie, of course. He still loved her. He would always love her. He just didn't know whether he believed that she loved him; how could he credit her feelings for Superman when she didn't feel that way about Clark?

And he was allowing his doubts about her to affect his relationship with her as Superman. It was now four days since their argument, the night when he had told her his name was Kal-El. He hadn't made love to her since. He had visited her, but the first night he had left after a short time, pleading an emergency. There hadn't been one; he had just been torn between guilt at still not having told her the truth, and anger at her for not having guessed it.

He hadn't come to her the following night, and last night he had flown into her apartment very late. She had been in bed, asleep already, though not very deeply since his arrival had woken her. He had used the lateness of the hour as an excuse not to stay, apologising for waking her, and had left quickly afterwards. He had seen the hurt in her eyes as he'd turned to go, but had kept on going.

And now he had walked away from her as Clark.

What was it about him? What impulse was this he was working on, which was causing him to self-destruct, and to destroy the relationship which had meant everything to him? He had had Lois's friendship as Clark, and her love as Superman. Soon, he would have neither.

There was only one thing to do; he should have done it long ago. Sending his large body hurtling through the sky, he headed for Smallville.

Martha and Jonathan were surprised to see him, but as usual made him welcome; within minutes he was seated at the kitchen table with a glass of buttermilk and some pecan pie in front of him. Neither of them said a word while he ate, but he felt their gazes on him.

As he laid his spoon back in the dish, he glanced at his mother. Her expression was stern, but not condemning.

"Isn't it time you told us what's going on, Clark Jerome Kent?" she challenged him quietly.

"Mom?" He was taken aback.

"Now come on, son, of course we know that something's been happening - something you didn't think we'd approve of. You didn't call us for ages, and then you barely said anything when we called you." Jonathan's voice carried that tone which said that he was disappointed in his son.

Clark threw his head into his hands. "Mom, Dad, I've really messed up," he groaned, his voice muffled.

Instantly, Martha's hand was resting on his hair. "Clark, it can't be that bad. Now why don't you tell us about it?"

"Has it got anything to do with Lois?" Jonathan had liked Lois Lane from the moment he had met her, even though she had for some unknown reason imagined he was a cross-dresser.

"How'd you guess, Dad?" Clark's tone was despairing, and Martha exchanged glances with her husband.

Clark sighed then and raised his head to meet his parents' gazes. "Okay. Well, it's kind of a long story, and I know you're going to tell me I behaved appallingly - "

"Why don't you let us be the judge of that?" Martha suggested.

Clark nodded. "Lois. I... started a relationship with her," he began.

"But Clark, that's great news!" Martha exclaimed.

"No, it's not. I started the relationship as... as Superman."

He heard his parents gasp, then Jonathan asked, "What kind of a relationship, son?"

"Can't you guess?" he asked bitterly. "I'm... I've been sleeping with her."

"As Superman? And she doesn't know you're Clark?" Martha was shocked.

"No. I... wanted to tell her, but I was scared to, and then the longer I left it the harder it got - until it got to a point where I just couldn't tell her at all. Then... then I started to hate the fact that she said she loved Superman but she only liked Clark, and... and I - Superman's been avoiding her and Clark just dumped her...." He trailed off, aware that his explanation had suddenly become completely incomprehensible.

Jonathan shook his head slowly at his son. "Clark, you're going to have to stop thinking of yourself in the third person. If you don't know who you are, how on earth do you expect Lois to know?"

Martha took Clark's hand in his, squeezing it warmly. "Why don't you start at the beginning, honey?"

So he told them everything, from Lois's discovery about the Kryptonite and the hazardous action she had taken to save his life, to the argument outside the deli. His parents listened in silence.

Eventually, Martha asked him, "Do you hate Lois?"

He stared at his mother in disbelief. "How can you ask that? I love her!"

She shrugged. "Seems to me you've left her thinking you hate her - or at least, that Clark hates her, and Superman's gone off her."

Clark fell silent; his mother was right. And Lois did not deserve the way he had spoken to her. She had been fully entitled to feel not only hurt, but completely baffled by his behaviour; it had been unwarranted and completely out of the blue.

"Mom, I do love Lois. I want to be with her - not just as a part-time lover, but as a partner. As her husband, if she'd have me. And yes, I know given the way I've treated her I don't deserve her. But... I

love her so much...."

"So what's your problem?" Martha demanded. "Just go and see her, tell her everything and beg her forgiveness! She might not forgive you immediately - in fact, I'd be disappointed in her if she did - but if she loves you, she'll understand."

"But that's just it, Mom," Clark protested miserably. "I don't know if she does love me."

"Of *course* she loves you!" Martha exclaimed, as Jonathan clucked disbelievingly. "Clark, you say she's told you she loves you dozens of times. You also said her behaviour told you the same thing - "

"But that's Superman," Clark objected. "She doesn't love *me.* So how can I...?"

"Clark, you *are* Superman. And once she knows that, she'll love Clark as well." Clark was about to protest at this, but Martha prevented him. "Clark, I know what you're going to say. But is Lois the kind of woman who would two-time her boyfriend? As far as she knows, you and Superman are two different people. However much she cares for you, she wouldn't allow herself to see you - Clark - as a potential partner when she's in love with someone else. You've convinced her you're two separate people, Clark - you can hardly blame her for believing it!"

Clark brooded on his mother's words for several moments. Then he sighed deeply and shook his head. "It's all my own fault, I know. And I've only got myself to blame if I lose her forever."

Jonathan stood up, getting ready to go back to his crops. "I don't think you'll do that, son. Lois is a better woman than you're giving her credit for."

"Jonathan's right, sweetie," Martha told him. "You really should trust Lois."

She had called in sick, at the same time denying all knowledge of Clark's whereabouts. It wasn't too much of a lie, claiming to be sick; she had cried for what seemed like hours after Clark had abandoned her, and had afterwards just lain on her bed, feeling weak and depressed.

What on earth could she have said, or done, to cause Clark to turn on her like that? How could he have said that he didn't have anything to say to her; how could he have used that tone which suggested that he hated her? How could he have walked off like that?

Her life was a mess, she thought miserably. She had lost her best friend, and she had never realised that the loss could hurt so much. And it also looked like her relationship with Superman was over. He had barely spent any time with her since the night they'd had the fight and she'd told him she felt like his mistress. Had she pushed too hard, or had he just gone off her? Whatever; he hadn't made love to her since, and last night he had almost seemed relieved to have an excuse to leave.

She had lost her lover and her friend... and Lois stilled as she realised that, of the two, losing Clark hurt more. If she was honest with herself, she had always known that the relationship with Superman wouldn't last. But Clark... although he'd only been around for about six months, she'd somehow come to think he would always be there when she needed him.

< Oh, Clark! Why!>

He knocked tentatively at her door. He had already been to the Planet, and had been told by Jimmy that she had called in sick; then Perry had demanded to know where he had been and where in the Sam Hill their assignment was. So he had been forced to contain his anxiety and instead spend an hour writing an article for the morning edition. He could have written it faster - he'd desperately wanted to do it faster - but he'd been conscious that there were people around who would notice the use of Super-speed.

Finally, he'd been able to escape, and now he waited, his heart in his mouth, for her to answer the door. He had been torn between coming to her as Clark or as Superman, but he had eventually decided that, much as he needed to tell her the truth about who Superman really was, he first needed to undo the damage he had done as Clark. He was afraid that she would look through her spy-hole and, seeing it was him, refuse to open the door; but then he heard her several locks open one by one.

The door opened and she stood there, dressed in jeans and a sloppy sweatshirt. Her hair was tousled, and her face was streaked with tears. She stared at him without speaking.

"Lois... Lois, can we talk?" His voice shook as he envisaged her reply. < I don't think I've anything to say to you, Clark> But she opened the door wider and stepped back.

He entered, and shut the door behind him. She was crossing to the kitchen area, where she stood leaning against the worktop, her back to him.

"Lois, I'm sorry," he said huskily. "I am so sorry."

She turned to face him, and he saw there were fresh tears in her eyes. "You walked out on me - you said you didn't care..."

< Oh, God...> "Lois, I didn't know what I was saying... I care about you more than I could ever explain, ever tell you. I hate myself for what I did." His own voice was nearly breaking as he spoke, the combination of her distress and his own fears and self-disgust making him emotional.

"Never do that to me again...." Her voice was no more than a whisper, and he needed his Super-hearing to catch the words. As her tears began to fall faster, he strode to her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Clark... oh, Clark, I thought I'd lost you," she sobbed.

"Never," he vowed. Slipping his arm under her knees to carry her, he walked with her to one of the couches and sat with her on his lap, mirroring their position of a few evenings ago when his actions as Superman had made her cry. It was ironic, he thought; exactly the same circumstances, and she didn't know that the same man held her.

But that wasn't her fault, he reminded himself as he stroked her hair and murmured broken apologies to her.

She clung to him in a way which, somewhere in the deepest recesses of his mind, he wondered at. He knew, had finally admitted to himself, that she really did care for him, albeit as a friend. He could see that he had hurt her far more than he'd realised by his behaviour earlier. But she was behaving as if his walking out on her had been something devastating to her.

Finally, he tipped her chin up to seek her eyes. Having got over his initial relief that she seemed to be willing to forgive him, his body was beginning to react to her closeness, and he didn't want her to know that. Now that he was her lover, it was very difficult to hold her so close to him and not want to be more intimate with her.

"Lois... are you okay?" he asked hesitantly.

She nodded, pulling away from him a little; her expression was embarrassed. "I... I didn't mean to cry all over you, Clark."

"That's what friends are for," he assured her. "And I... I know I've been a pretty lousy friend lately, but I plan to make up for that."

"What did I do wrong, Clark?" she asked, shifting from his lap to sit beside him. To his joy, she didn't immediately move to the other corner of the couch; instead, she sat close to him and rested her head against his shoulder. He took the opportunity to wrap his arm around her shoulders.

Sighing, he answered as best he could under the circumstances. "You did nothing wrong, Lois. It wasn't your fault - I... I was feeling... something I had no right to be feeling."

She was silent for a few moments, clearly trying to make sense of his words. Then she spoke softly, enquiringly. "Were you... I mean, do you know I'm in a... a relationship?"

His breath caught in his throat. "Ummm... yes, I, well, I guess I knew."

"And I didn't tell you about it..." she murmured. "I guess that's no way for a friend to behave either, Clark. Friends don't keep secrets."

< No, they don't> he thought glumly.

She shifted so that she could see his face. "Clark, there were... reasons... why I couldn't say anything. Though there've been times - especially lately - when I really could've done with a friend to talk

to...."

He hugged her. "Lois, you can *always* talk to me. About anything."

"I know," she told him. "I also know that that wasn't you talking to me earlier today, Clark. I wish whatever made you feel like that about me had never happened - you must really have thought I didn't care about you. I... ummm... I need you to know that's not true." Clark's breath caught in his throat again as she continued. "Clark, I love you. And you know, you're only the second man I've ever said that to and meant it - the other is... the man I'm involved with."

Shocked, he could only stare at her.

She continued, "Clark, I hardly understand it myself. I only know that when I thought I'd lost you today it hurt more than anything I've ever experienced before. I don't mean I'm in love with you - well, I can't be, I'm in love with K... with the man I'm involved with. But you... you'll always be very special to me."

With his free hand, he stroked a finger across her cheek. "Lois, you are very special to me too. And I love you, very much."

She placed a finger against his mouth. "Don't say anything more, Clark. You know I can't... I'm involved with someone else." As if on a sudden impulse, she leaned up towards him and kissed his lips, a sweet, loving yet passionless kiss. His arms tightened around her momentarily as he longed for the words to tell her his secret.

She drew back and met his gaze. "Clark... I don't want to be unfair to you. I just hope you can forgive me and be my friend?"

"*Me* forgive *you*?" he exclaimed, shocked. "I'm just amazed that you can forgive what I did!"

"You came back," she said simply.

"Are you happy, Lois?" he asked her abruptly, needing to know the answer.

She was silent for a few moments, then said, "I need to tell you about my... relationship." She paused, reaching for his free hand and linking her fingers through his. "It's... complicated, and the one thing I can't do is tell you who he is. But it's not Luthor, I promise you that!" she added quickly, aware of his feelings about the multi-millionaire.

"We've been together for almost a month," she began. "At first, I was so happy - I've been in love with him for a long time, you see. And he said he loved me too, and it was wonderful, except that we can't be together publicly. And he even started to trust me, to tell me things about himself no-one else knew. I thought... I really thought that maybe there was a way we could be together properly."

"But then... well, like I said, he started to tell me more, and I realised from something he told me that he'd been deceiving me about... things... for a while. And that hurt. And I told him it hurt. And I thought we'd sorted it, but...." She trailed off, falling

silent.

Clark listened, feeling as if she was tearing his heart out with her indictment of his behaviour. "And... you don't know if you can forgive him the deceit?" he asked.

But she shook her head immediately. "That's not... I mean, he told me the truth, or nearly all of it, and I understand why he had to lie. I can forgive that, really. I mean, that's what love's all about. No, it's that... I've barely seen him since, and when he did come, he was distant, and he couldn't wait to leave.

"Oh, Clark!" she sobbed again. "I think he's gone off me... he doesn't love me, he wants to finish it...." He pulled her head onto his shoulder again, hugging her tightly as she cried fresh tears.

< Oh God, what have I put her through?> he asked himself, agonised. < How on earth do I put this right?>

He tested out the words in his mind. < Lois, I haven't gone off you. I love you more than words could ever say... I am Kal-El, Superman....>

But how would she react to the words, said as Clark? He wasn't sure.

He tipped her face up again, and touched his forehead to hers.

"Lois... I'm sure it's not that. He... no-one who was lucky enough to have you could want to let you go... I know I wouldn't," he couldn't prevent himself saying.

She stared up at him, a strange light in her eyes. "Clark... I...." Suddenly she jumped to her feet and rushed over to the window. "Oh, God, Clark, I'm so confused!"

Not understanding what she meant, Clark stood and went over to her; but she backed away from him. "Clark... please don't. It's all the emotional stuff from this afternoon - but I'm in love with... please, don't touch me." Her voice was wild, almost hysterical.

He backed away, almost beginning to understand. Was she finally beginning to penetrate his disguise?

"Lois... I should go."

"No!" Strange; his presence seemed to be making her uncomfortable, yet she didn't want him to go.

"Lois, I think we both need me to leave," he assured her. "But if you want me to, I'll come back later."

She nodded. "But where will I find you?" she asked anxiously.

"You'll know where to find me," he assured her.

After he'd gone, she sank onto the couch again and tried to make sense of what had happened. Had she really told Clark she loved him?

Yes, she had. And she had meant it.

But how was that possible when she loved Kal-El?

Was it possible to love two men simultaneously?

She had kissed him, and wanted to go on kissing him; she had seen in his eyes a longing, a need to be closer to her. And when he had been holding her on his lap, she had felt his arousal. Not at first; it had only happened later, as they had both calmed down and relaxed after the emotional upheaval. And when she had touched her lips to his, she had felt a familiar, and shocking, stirring deep inside her - how could that have happened?

Clark loved her. In some way, she had always known that; he had given her plenty of clues, and those clues had still been there over the past couple of weeks. Those yearning glances - he knew she had a man in her life, and he had been hurt.

She loved Kal-El, but yet when Clark had said that he thought no-one who was lucky enough to have her in his life could bear to let her go, she had been overcome with a need to kiss him, be held by him, to be loved by him.

Could she be in love with Clark?

What would it be like to be loved by Clark? Well, for a start, he would never make her feel like a mistress. He would cherish her; he would be proud to be with her. He would probably want to be over-protective, but she would persuade him out of that. He would shower her with compliments, and little presents and tokens of his love, and would never let her forget how much she was cherished.

How could any woman who was loved by Clark bear to let him go?

How could **she** let him go?

< Oh, God, what do I do? >

Well, if Kal-El was trying to escape from their relationship, she would let him. It would hurt, but then perhaps she would be better off with Clark anyway. She would miss the Super-powered additions to their lovemaking; but then, sex wasn't the most important thing in their relationship. Being loved and trusted was.

She frowned suddenly as she realised the directions her thoughts were taking her. Was she really deciding to give up Kal-El and try to start a relationship with Clark? Would Clark even accept her, after she had told him she loved someone else?

A familiar sound from outside her window distracted her, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. It was Kal-El! But she wasn't ready... she didn't know what she wanted to say to him.

She crossed slowly to the window as he let himself in, the sight of

his strong body jumping down to the floor as his cape billowed around him making her love him all over again.

He walked to stand in front of her, his eyes regretful. He was going to tell her it was over, she realised, torn between despair at losing him and relief that the choice had been made for her.

But his hand cupped her chin lightly, tipping her face up to him, as he lowered his head and kissed her with infinite tenderness. "Lois... my love, I am so sorry. I've only just realised what I've been doing to you... what you must have thought since the other night." His voice was gentle, asking for forgiveness.

She raised confused eyes to his. "Kal-El, I just don't know what to think any more...."

"I know, and it's my fault," he told her, which didn't enlighten her at all. "Lois, can we talk? There's something I... need... to tell you, something I should have told you weeks ago."

She nodded, leading the way to the couch. As he sat beside her, taking her hand loosely in his, she studied his expression. He looked... anxious, nervous, as if what he had to say was so serious that....

She reached up and caressed his face. "Kal-El, I love you. Whatever it is, nothing can change that."

"This might, Lois," he told her quietly. "You see, I've been deceiving you about something really important. Do you remember asking me what my Earth parents had named me? You guessed that I had a life, as a normal man, which you knew nothing about."

She nodded, taking a sharp intake of breath as she realised that this was it: he was finally going to tell her everything about himself. "Who are you, Kal-El?"

A strange choice of words, Clark thought, given that Lois had previously given the impression that she assumed his other identity was no more than a disguise. She surely believed that Superman, Kal-El, was who he was.

He took a deep breath, watching her face for every fleeting expression. She was still gazing at him with concern and love. He hesitated, wanting to treasure that gaze for as long as possible.

She touched his hand lightly. "Kal-El?" What was he going to tell her? How could it be that bad?

The words came quietly. "Lois, my name is Clark Kent." She stared, thinking that she couldn't possibly have heard him properly.

"Cl...ark Kent...? But I have a friend... called...." She trailed off, suddenly seeing the truth in his eyes. "Clark...?" A ragged sob in her voice, she asked the question of him.

"Yes, it's me, Lois. It was me all along," he confessed, his voice and expression miserable.

Lois jumped to her feet, unable to believe what was happening. Her lover - and before that, her hero - had all along been the hack from Nowheresville, Mr Greenjeans who sat opposite her at work! And he had visited her, paid her compliments, teased her as Superman, while most probably laughing at her behind her back as Clark. And more recently, he had made her his lover, without ever telling her who she was making love with.

How could he possibly have deceived her, betrayed her, like this?

"Kal... Clark, I...." She was lost for words, couldn't put into words her disgust at what he had done.

He raised his gaze to hers again, and she hardened her heart to the tears glistening in his eyes. "Lois, I know I behaved appallingly, and you must despise me for what I've done - believe me, it's no more than I despise myself. I... all I can say is that, for what it's worth, I love you. Whether I'm Clark, or Kal-El, I love you."

She decided to ignore his avowal. "Just who are you really?" she demanded.

He sighed. "I'm Clark Kent. I was brought up as Clark, and like I told you, I never knew where I came from or why I could do the... things I do until very recently. As for... Kal-El, I told you the truth about that. I only found out that was my birth name when the globe spoke to me. As for... Superman, that is a disguise, so that I can help people without having my life and my parents' lives ruined because people find out what Clark Kent is capable of."

Lois was silent, taking in what he had said. It did make sense. If he had been brought up on this planet, then it was perfectly rational that he would *be* the person he had been brought up as. So Kal-El, her lover, had not been real either.

And yet... the man who had come to her at nights, who had made love to her so beautifully, who had made her cry out with passion, was not ephemeral, a one-dimensional disguise. That man was real... and yet he was not Clark. He behaved to her in a way which Clark would not - such as his occasional audacity, his use of his Super-vision to see under her clothes, the way he had shut her out of his life. Kal-El was different.

But, she wondered, did Clark realise that?

She pushed the thought away, unable to deal with it now. The question in her mind was how to respond to the appalling discovery that her best friend and her lover were one and the same. Could either relationship survive? Had he hurt her too much with her deceit?

She just didn't know.

Did she want either to survive? She remembered her misery earlier that afternoon when she had thought that she'd lost both anyway, and her gut instinct that the loss of Clark hurt her more. Then she remembered the thought that she loved Clark...

But if she loved Clark, and she loved Kal-El, then what was the

problem?

She blinked and turned away from the man... men? She didn't know any longer; the man now standing in front of her. Seeing him, in the Suit, looking at her with that desperately miserable expression on his face, was only confusing her.

She loved him... and she hated him. Hated the deceit, the fact that she was now wondering what he had thought of her all this time, the pain he had put her through over the past few days which, it was now obvious to her, must have been caused by his own deceit. It had nothing to do with Clark being jealous because she had a boyfriend and she hadn't told him about it! He'd known all along! It was leading the double life which had caused his moods and his explosion earlier.

Spinning around on her heel, she marched towards him. She pushed at his chest with the flat of her hand, and hissed, "Go. Get out of here. I can't...."

< I can't think straight with you here >

He looked even more miserable, if that was possible. "Lois... I'm sorry...."

"Go."

Defeated, Superman strode to the window and flew away.

< Why do I always eat ice cream when I'm miserable? > Lois asked herself an hour later, glancing in disgust at the empty tub of double chocolate chip in front of her. Her thoughts had been going round and around in circles ever since Kal-El... no, Clark, left. She was still as confused as ever; she had no idea what she wanted.

Did she hate him? She didn't know.

Did she love him? Probably.

Could she forgive him? Forgive him for which? For the deceit, or for making her believe that there were two of him? For making her miserable because of *his* guilt? For making her feel like a mistress because he couldn't tell her the truth? For making her more unhappy than she had ever been in her life before when she thought she'd lost her best friend? For making her believe she was falling in love with two different men?

For... giving her the best sex she'd ever had in her life. For making her feel more loved than she had ever been before. For making her feel needed, wanted... cared for. For being the best friend she had ever had; for loving her no matter what.

Loving no matter what....

A snippet of conversation came back to her.

Clark hasd asked, knowing that she was talking about him, about

Kal-El, "And... you don't know if you can forgive him the deceit?"

She had instantly denied the accusation. "That's not... I mean, he told me the truth, or nearly all of it, and I understand why he had to lie. I can forgive that, really. I mean, that's what love's all about."

That's what love's all about...

But did she understand why he had had to lie?

She understood the initial lie - well, it wasn't a lie. He *was* Clark Kent. Then he became Superman, and of course he couldn't tell her who he really was. That would have defeated the object, especially since she was a journalist and would have gone after the story. And after all, she hadn't exactly been very nice to Clark in the beginning. He couldn't have told her then.

So just when should he have told her? When he'd been ill in Smallville - for it was perfectly clear to her now what had happened. He'd been exposed to Kryptonite, and had nearly died as a result. No wonder his parents had been so upset.

Should he have told her when she and Clark had become close, when they had started having those late-night phone calls? When she had openly admitted to him that she considered him a friend?

No, there wasn't any reason why he should have, at that point. Nor, in the immediate aftermath of the Kryptonite incident, when they had been so relieved that each was all right, had there been a need to confess. But then the concern, the relief, had turned to intimacy; they had made love. He should have told her then....

She thought back, remembering his hesitancy during that first encounter. And afterwards, there had been clearly something on his mind. His face had been very expressive, as if he'd been trying to put into words what he wanted to say to her. Then he'd been called away.

And as she reflected on their relationship, she realised that there had been other times when it had seemed as if he was about to confess something, but had drawn back. Even the night when he had finally admitted that he had another identity... she remembered that he had told her he was afraid. Afraid that she wouldn't love him any more once she knew....

And she had assured him that it wouldn't make a difference. She loved him, regardless. Nothing he could tell her would change her feelings for him.

He would have told her then, she realised suddenly. But he had been called away, and she knew it had been a genuine emergency; the fire had been reported in the media the next morning. He had been trying to pluck up the courage then to tell her he was Clark. And she had assured him that it would make no difference....

< Love means never having to say you're sorry> A corny old line from a novel, which had found its way onto endless greeting cards, flitted into her mind. It wasn't true; lovers did need to say sorry

sometimes. But even more important than the apology itself was the ability to forgive.

Clark lay full-length on the couch in his apartment, brooding on those few minutes with Lois after he had told her the truth. He had been right all along; he had left it too long, and she would never forgive him now. His mind idly began to make plans: a new city, a new job - Perry would give him a good reference - a resolve never to fall in love again....

His Super-hearing picked up a sound outside his door. Glancing over, not bothering to use his Super-vision, he could see a shape outside. He didn't want any visitors, and for a moment was tempted to stay still and not answer the inevitable knock. But his innate good manners won through and, picking up his glasses, he swung his feet to the floor and strode over to open the door.

Lois stood there.

His mouth gaped. "Lois... I didn't expect...."

She threw him a nervous smile. "You said that I'd know where to find you if I wanted you...."

He ran his hand through his hair abstractedly. "I guess... I thought you'd call for Superman...."

She shook her head. "It's Clark I want." She gestured past him. "Can I come in?"

He stepped back. "Of course. Can I... get you something?"

She regarded him thoughtfully. "I guess if I said I wanted some rare tropical fruit from some remote island somewhere, you'd get it for me?"

Clark wasn't sure what to make of her manner, but he answered truthfully. "Yes. Anything you wanted."

She shook her head. "I don't want anything, thanks. Only to talk to you. We've got a lot to sort out if we're going to move on from here together."

Together? Did she mean...? His heart leapt, then crashed again as he thought that she probably just meant that they needed to resolve the situation so that they could carry on working together.

"Lois.... I know what I've done is going to be a problem for you in future, so I've decided to leave, get a job somewhere else - "

She interrupted him, her eyes flashing. "You're not going anywhere, Clark Kent!"

"I'm not?" he asked, confused.

She sat on his couch, her eyes inviting him to sit next to her. "Clark, I've been doing a lot of thinking since you left. And I've realised that the most important thing is that we love each other. I

told you earlier today - before I knew who you were - that I could forgive your deceit because love is the most important thing there is. Nothing else matters. And I was going to come over here to tell you that, then I started thinking about a few more things." She paused, gazing at him, seeing the tension in his face. "Clark, I was trying to work out why you hadn't told me the truth sooner, and I realised that a lot of it's my fault. The way I treated you... I was pretty horrible to you at times. And I flaunted my feelings for Superman in front of you, and that must have made you believe I couldn't love you as Clark - that I didn't think Clark was worth anything. And even when we became friends, I still compared you unfavourably with Superman."

Clark knew she was right, but he couldn't bear to have her blame herself. He hushed her, brushing her hair away from her forehead with his hand. But she smiled at him before continuing.

"No, let me say this, Clark. I guess I finally figured out the real issue - that I'd just been so stupid. I mean, I knew you better than anyone, right? If anyone should have figured out the truth, I should. And because I didn't, I forced you to be two different people around me, and that must have been really hard on you."

"Lois, I chose to be those two people," he protested, unwilling to allow her to accept blame despite the fact that he himself had been critical of her before for not seeing the truth. "As far as you were concerned, Superman - and later Kal-El - was a real person. You couldn't have known it was just me."

"Not *just you,* Clark," Lois protested. "Anyway, the point is that I love you, whatever your name happens to be, and I want us to be together. That's what I came to say to you."

His heart leapt, but he had to know something first. "Who do you want, Lois? Kal-El... or Clark?"

But she shook her head at him. "You still don't understand, do you? I want *you,* the real you, the person only your parents see."

Clark stilled. Did she mean that? Did she really understand what she was saying?

"Clark, I want Clark Kent *and* Kal-El - don't you understand that you're both of them? I want the man I work with, and curl up and watch videos with, and have fights with. I want someone I can go to the movies and dinner with, and walk hand in hand with. I want the man who loves me and cherishes me more than anything else in his life. I want the man who has made me feel more protected and wanted than I have ever felt before. I want the most fantastic lover I have ever had, and I want to make love on the ceiling with him. Sometimes. And other times, I just want to make love on the bed, with no Super-powers, just the two of us. *Now* do you see?"

Clark inhaled sharply. "I really misjudged you, Lois. For a long time, I thought my powers, the fact that I was Superman, was what's important to you. I... well, Clark just didn't seem to cut it."

But she squeezed his hand. "I realised late this afternoon that I was in love with Clark too. Do you know how that made me feel? Like I was being unfaithful - I was in love with two men at once!"

He gasped. "Lois... I didn't know...." She had told him she loved him, but she had been careful to distinguish that love from the way she said she felt about Kal-El.

"Why do you think I ran away from you, Clark?" she asked him pointedly. "If I'd stayed in your arms any longer, I'd have been pleading with you to kiss me. *Really* kiss me. And... I wanted you. I'd never felt that way about you - about my partner - before, and I was scared."

He reached for her, wrapping his arms about her, nuzzling his face into her hair. "Oh, God, Lois, I was scared too. I knew you were talking about me, and I wanted so badly to tell you the truth, but I just didn't know how to. It just seemed to me that I needed to tell you as Kal-El, not as Clark. I'm not sure why."

She reached up to kiss him, the embrace at first healing but later turning into a passionate exchange which had Lois breaking away, coughing. "Clark... I don't have Super-powers, I can't hold my breath as long as you can!"

"Sorry, I'm sorry!" he exclaimed, stricken. "I knew I'd hurt you one of these days because of my powers!"

She caught his arm. "Clark - don't you dare say that. You've never physically hurt me, and I intend to make sure that you don't hurt me in other ways again. Or at least, if you do, that I make it easy for you to say sorry, and for us to forgive each other."

His heart was full, the emotions spilling over. Lois knew the truth about him, she understood, she had forgiven him and she still loved him, His mother had been right, as usual.

"So... where do we go from here?" he asked her tentatively.

She smiled at him, her hands doing interesting things to his chest. "Where do you want to go from here, Clark? I sort of think the bedroom might be the most comfortable place...."

His arousal swelled again. "Ummm... yeah, I guess.... But I meant us, our relationship."

She carried on with her task, methodically unbuttoning his denim shirt. "Well, what do you think?"

He hesitated. "Lois, I'd like to marry you. Look, I'm not necessarily talking immediately, you can have as much time as you want to think about it, I won't pressure you...." He stared at her hopefully, fearfully.

Marriage... It was possible, with Clark, where it wouldn't have been with Superman, Lois realised. She met his gaze. "I never really thought about marriage - for myself, that is. I mean, my parents' marriage was such a disaster.... But I love you, and I want us to be together. So... yes, I'll marry you."

She would be his wife... Clark found it difficult to contain his joy. But he had to be fair to her, had to warn her... "Lois, you need to understand that this isn't going to be simple. It's not as if you're

just going to be married to Clark Kent. You're going to have to spend the rest of our lives putting up with me disappearing to help with some emergency, and covering up for me when I have to go. You're going to have to be polite but distant to Superman in public, never giving any hint that I'm your... your husband. And if we... have children, you're going to have to help me keep the secret from them until they're old enough to understand how important it is not to tell anyone. And they'll probably inherit my powers, so you'll have to cope with that too. And the only people you can ever talk about any of this with, other than me, are my parents." He studied her intently, his deep brown eyes anxious. "Are you sure you can cope with all that?"

She met his gaze, her own serious. "I'll have to learn, Clark. And I know you'll help me."

"Always," he promised her.

She bent her head to rasp her tongue across his nipple. "Clark... you know I love the way you've always respected me and never taken advantage. But right now, I think I'd like Kal-El to do a little bit of advantage-taking...." She raised her head and threw him a sultry look, taking off his glasses and throwing them aside.

"You would, would you?" he growled in response. He scooped her into his arms and stood up, then without warning levered himself off the floor to float on his back with her on top of him. Carrying her in this way, he flew them both into his bedroom then with a wicked grin allowed her to fall off him, onto the bed.

"You want Kal-El to have his evil way with you, do you, sweetheart?" he asked her.

She sat up. "Actually, I've changed my mind. I think I'd like to make love with Clark Kent."

"Ah, but Clark *is* Kal-El," he reminded her.

She smiled. "I know you are, but he's also different in a number of ways. That's why it was so easy to believe that he was a separate person." She reached up to finish unbuttoning his shirt, then pushed it off his shoulders as he floated down to kneel in front of her on the bed.

"So Clark would... do what, now?" he asked her.

She smiled at him. "I think you know the answer to that."

He moved closer to her, bending to kiss her lovingly; at the same time, he eased her sweatshirt up to allow his hands opportunity to caress her underneath. She wasn't wearing a bra. He groaned.

She reached for the fastening of his jeans; he helped her push them down over his hips. His arousal was hard and throbbing, clearly evident to her. He smiled suddenly, understanding. "Kal-El would be impatient - he would want to start touching you, plunge himself inside you as soon as he could, or have you take him in his mouth, yes?"

Lois returned his smile. "So what would Clark do?"

"Ah." His lips curved sweetly as he thought. "Clark would want to spend ages just looking at you. He would want to stroke every inch of your body with his fingers, and kiss you everywhere you wanted to be kissed. He'd want to do whatever you wanted him to do to give you pleasure. And then, and only then, would he want to satisfy himself too."

Lois took his hands and guided them to the edge of her sweatshirt.
"So what are you waiting for, Clark?"

- The End -

End
file.